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Short Stories

Twice A Month

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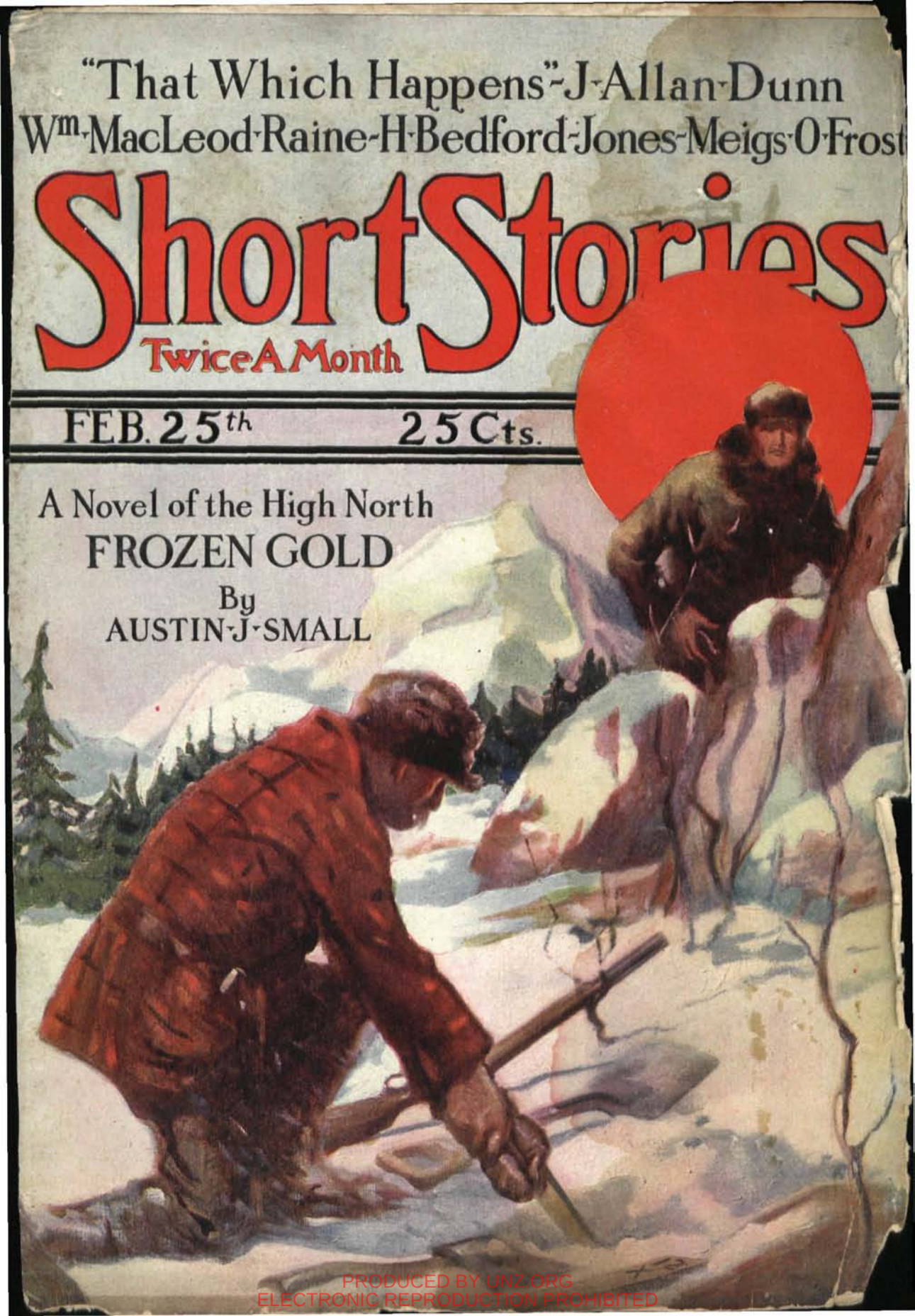
A Novel of the High North

FROZEN GOLD

By

AUSTIN J. SMALL



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February 25, 1924

Short Stories

Vol. CVI., No. 4 — Whole No. 437

HARRY E. MAULE, EDITOR — D. McILWRAITH, ASSOCIATE EDITOR

HAPPINESS AND PERFECTION

A FEW issues back we used this space for a little discussion under the heading of "The Vision of Perfection" pointing out the necessity for a man to *see* a thing perfect, in order that he might bring into being a fairly passable piece of work. The other day, reading the autobiography of that wise publisher, Henry Holt, we came on a further contribution to the subject of perfection. He says:

"Don't demand perfection anywhere but in yourself and your work. Cultivate the art of getting happiness from imperfect experiences, and especially from imperfect people. As a rule, happiness . . . is mainly a by-product of duty."

Just so. But happiness is not to be found in love alone, nor in money, nor position, nor accomplishment—but in a combination of these and many other things besides. Different goals for different people. But be very sure that there are certain ingredients that go into the mixture for everyone, and one of them is the sense of a sincere effort to accomplish something worth while with your life.

It is a common trait to look for perfection *and fail to find it* in others; and to see perfection in our own poor works when their shortcomings are manifest to everyone else. Yet, the man will be happier who reverses these two standards of life and work and conduct and takes upon himself the rule of doing things as he thinks they should be done, accepting his own behavior only as it is checked up with his ideal of perfection.

For others let him be tolerant and get as much happiness as he can from his friends and relatives as their good and amiable qualities will give him. Their shortcomings need not bother him too much, because they are going to cause their owners a great deal more trouble and mental anguish in the course of a lifetime than they are him.

THE EDITOR.

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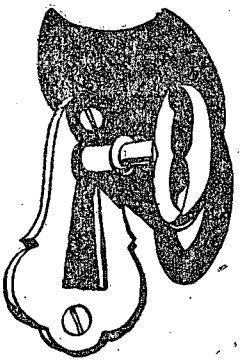

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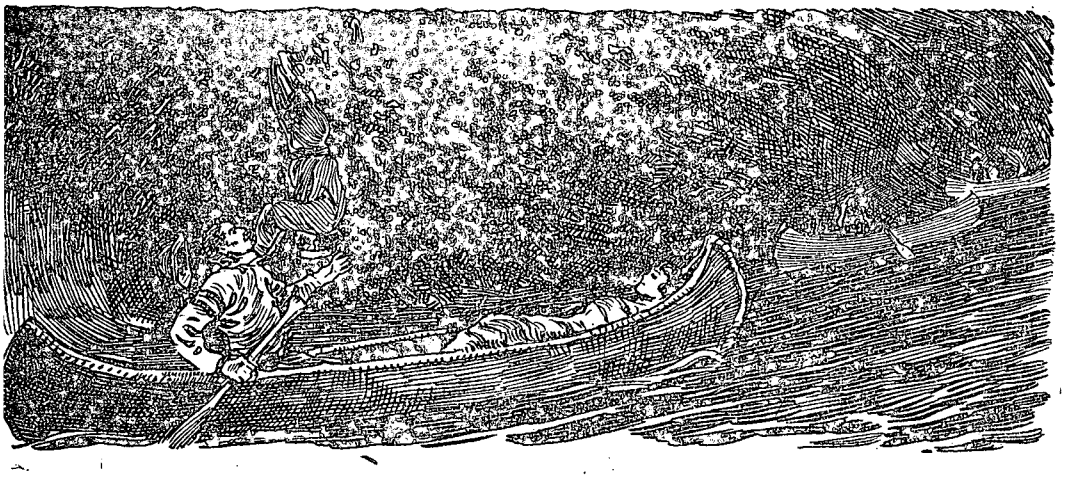

FROZEN GOLD

A Complete Novel of the Stampede Days of the North

By AUSTIN J. SMALL

THE HIGH NORTH, LAND OF HIDDEN WEALTH AND SUDDEN DEATH; LAND WHERE THE MOUNTED GUARD THE LAW ON ONE SIDE OF A FROZEN BOUNDARY, BUT WHERE DANGER KNOWS NO BOUNDARIES; TO SUCH A LAND CAME NEWS OF A NEW BONANZA—UP THERE BEHIND THE SKYLINE

I

IT WAS a terrific beginning to the worst day Cedar Falls had ever known. It started with a rush and a roar and it came without warning or announcement.

Until that day, some time after the best known Klondike rushes, the Come Inside had existed as one of the quietest saloons on the whole two thousand miles of the Yukon. Its owner, Josh Henderson, preferred it that way. He liked the quiet life; and, having a way and a gun with him, he generally got it.

But on that day a lot of totally unexpected things happened; and they happened in such a way that Cedar Falls suffered a jolt from which it never quite recovered.

Work in the town had ceased abruptly a few minutes after noon, that being the precise moment when Devereaux, the mail runner, was sighted swinging his dogs round the curve of the northbound trail, heading up from Dawson with the mails. Cedar Falls dropped its jobs and adjourned to the Come Inside.

Jim Devereaux came and departed. His [illegible]cato voice, faint but distinct on the frosty air, floated back down the trail as he left for Forty Mile and Cudahy. As he urged on his dogs the crack of his whip sounded clear as pistol shots.

Cedar Falls drank to him, and then swapped the news. Mail day was an eagerly talkative day in the Come Inside. All topics of all nations sounded round the bar—there were sixty-seven souls and eleven flags in Cedar Falls. It was warm and cosy in the saloon. Two sheet-iron stoves, one at each end of the bar, roared away noisily. Odd groups drifted out and away to their jobs. Others sat on round the fires and criticized the efforts of a dance girl struggling to learn the intricacies of the latest ballroom craze. An occasional burst of laughter ripped out of the steady hum of conversation. Billy Masterson, a Government clerk, reached over for his concertina.

And it was just about then that it happened.

The door suddenly burst open with a crash. Three massive, heavily booted feet had landed on it simultaneously from the outside. So violent was the impact that it shook the whole saloon and made the pewters jump.

"Put 'em up!"

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As though to the touch of a magic silencer, the hum of voices snapped off as completely as though a steel curtain had dropped.

There were seventeen heads in that barroom and each one slowly screwed round in the direction of the door. And the sight that met their eyes was at once a jibe and a challenge.

Framed in the doorway three heavily furred figures stood, huge and menacing.

Thick caps were pulled low over savage faces; calm, unhurried breathing showed in steamy breath-vapor rising slowly and evenly. For half a minute they stood there, their eyes ranging the company with insolent deliberation.

They were masters of the situation and they were tremendously aware of the fact. They mastered it on the merits of three sullen looking blue-black automatics cocked against their sides.

"Boys, you may smoke." Bully Magain, leader and spokesman of his gang of outlaws, grinned at his own pleasantry. "'Low me to introduce two friends of mine; on my right, Mr. Coldwater Griff, a gent with the smile of a little child and the soul of a saint; on my left, Gentle Bill Haines, one of the old nobility and proud to serve you. If you move another inch, Billy Masterson, I'll plug an epitaph into your fool head. Come right along in, boys."

Josh Henderson, an old campaigner through the old hold-up days, leaned a pained face across the bar and begged his customers not to get rattled.

"Don't draw, boys, don't draw!" he implored. "You know what sized swine these are. They'll let fly as soon as look at you. Lord knows what the Mounted are doing to allow such scum on the earth. They'd oughter be ten foot of wind between the ground and their boots. For the love of Mike, keep your tempers. All they want is drink—as much as they can carry—and they want it free. But I'd like to have the shooting of the whole outfit."

Coldwater Griff raised his hat. "Thank you for those words," he said. "If you open your mouth again to the same tune, I'll fix it so's it'll stay shut." The three of them came slowly into the bar.

"Griff," said Magain with a wave of h gun, "take a stroll around and lift the ca nons."

The sixteen men in the company eye each other savagely, helplessly. The knew the Magain gang; knew the vicious ness that was ninety per cent. of the make-up. They knew, too, that any or of them would shoot to kill with as litt compunction as he would step on beetle.

Magain rapped on a table with his gu "Boys, I've an announcement to make," h said. All the jeering banter had gone ou of his voice; he spoke in a bull-throate rumble that was directed against each an every one of them.

"I'm the lord high boss of the Universe he announced, "and 'tain't often I find tim to call on Cedar Falls. When I do, guess, I do the honors proper, and in ac knowledgement of same, Cedar Falls going to lick my boots!"

For an hour the three bullies held u challenged sway in the Come Inside. The forced the company to drink the healths o every known outlaw on the river; the broke open the cans of tobacco and poure bottles of gin into them; they filled up th water butt with blocks of Chinese matche They rifled the till of every cent in i they knocked beer mugs out of the hand of those who were just about to drin and they threatened to shoot any man wh didn't keep his can filled. They got ho of Josh Henderson and pitched him nec and crop over his own bar. If they turne on a tap to draw off a drink, they left turned on, and Magain swished his boo about in the vile mess that slowly covere the floor.

"Before I hit the trail you're all goin to drink this stuff," he declared, kickin showers of it over the crowd. "You're a going down on your hands and knees drink these floor boards dry." H chuckled to himself, and Griff and Hain joined in his outburst of ribald laughte

Half a dozen men were sitting back o the deal forms with faces white and se Their hands were gripping the seats t their knuckle tips shone white. Bill Ma terson was quivering, and he was breathin through lips that were well nigh bloodles Not once but a dozen times Bully Magain roving eyes rested for a second on hi and each time the contempt and insolen in Magain's grew more intolerable.

Magain began to taunt them. It w patent to anyone that he was using ev vicious means in his power to pro

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a rush, and only the roving circles of the gun muzzles held it in check.

Every now and then Haines nodded to Henderson. The bartender looked for a couple of seconds at the unwavering automatic that pointed in a dead line with his stomach, shrugged his shoulders and filled up their mugs. Their particular concoction was rye whisky and gin, mixed.

With each drink Magain grew more arrogant and more threatening, and Masterson's endurance flicked over the border line. His toes had been slowly flexing for a spring, a spring that would take him from his chair to the throat of the swaggering giant that held the gun. He sprang, but even as he left his seat two pairs of hands shot out and pulled him back with a thud. There was a flash and a roar. Magain's bullet cut a neat furrow through the top of his hat.

"For God's sake don't start yet!" muttered Henderson in his ear. "Wait till they're drunk—we can down 'em with a rush."

The bully's voice impinged itself on the din. "You'll notice I can use this li'l feller. Next time you move without leave I'll put a bullet underneath that hat."

The whisky fumes had begun to climb. "I'm Bully Magain, I am!" he announced. "I'm first cousin to a bull buffalo. I'm the feller that keeps the Mounted on the jump! I eat bear meat raw! I'm a fighter, I am—and there's going to be a fight in this bar right now." He wheeled and glared at Masterson.

The Government clerk swayed up to his feet. "I'll—I'll—fight—you, you bullying hound!" He uttered the words in a strangled gasp. His eyes showed a dull flat light. "Put up your gun—I'll fight you!"

Magain reeled against the bar. "Hear that?" he roared. "Hear what he says? A fight, he says, and he don't know what a mouthful he's said. Now I'll tell one!" His voice rose to a bellowing roar of drunken frenzy. "I'll fight —I'll fight every living soul in this bar before the sun goes down; every living soul except that gal there and she shall dance while we fight."

His gun swept in erratic circles round the bar, holding off the human avalanche that itched to get at his hairy throat. The woman picked up her skirts and ran for the door, but Coldwater Griff caught her in his arms and flung her back.

"You'd best dance in here," he said, leering at her.

"Sure! Make her dance!" yelled Magain.

Bill Haines caught her round the waist and thrust her up on the table. "Dance, or I'll ram you face-down in the water butt," he growled.

Nell, of the dancehalls, was half-fainting from fright, but she boldly pretended a gay amusement. "Bully is my man—he eats bear meat raw!" she smirked.

Magain grinned and staggered over to her table. He leered up at her with a tipsy smile of approval. "Dance, you pretty devil," he said.

Nell's dance lasted scarcely a second. It consisted of a single coup, but it gave Cedar Falls the chance it was gasping for.

Quick as a flash Nell kicked. Her small slim foot shot out and connected with a boney click on the bully's fingers. Magain's automatic went whizzing over against the wall, and fell clattering to the floor.

While it was still in mid air Masterson leaped. Bully turned a fraction of a second too late; he received the full impact of a suddenly released human thunderbolt which hurtled at him in a flying riot of flailing arms and smashing fists. Magain was caught on the hop. Three separate and distinct triphammers thudded against his jaw in as many seconds and then a sledge head kicked up from nowhere and connected with his chin; at the same moment a battering ram of a head crashed violently into his stomach. Bully Magain went spinning against a roof standard and collapsed in a heap. Weight for weight, Magain could have half-murdered the smaller man, but Masterson had leaped in on the flood tide of passion. Now he spun round on the others and Coldwater's first bullet sizzed past his ear; the second went clean through a barrel of whisky and two more streams began to spread across the floor.

Half a score of the miners had flung themselves flat on their faces as soon as they saw Masterson lash out at Magain, and now one of them, prone on the floor, saw his chance. He swung a heavy foot round viciously, knocking Bill Haines's feet away from under him. The bully came down with a crash. A pine log whizzed across the bar and Coldwater

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Griff's gun went flying out of his grasp. Immediately the uproar in the bar rose to a deafening crescendo. It blazed in a thunderous din that swelled and swelled until clamorous demands for blood boomed through the tumult. The hot yells for vengeance drowned out the plaintive efforts for peace of Josh Henderson, hopping about behind his bar, half-crazy with the wrecking of his saloon.

Just when it looked like three lynchings, a very small thing happened, and its effect was unique.

A girl came and stood in the doorway. That was all; nothing more than that. But considering the amazing calm that suddenly fell in the bar she might well have been a whole detachment of the Mounted. Men who, but a minute before, had been governed only by a frantic desire for swift and savage vengeance, began to look absurdly confused and uncomfortable.

But what a girl she was! It was inconceivable and unbelievable that such a dainty creature could have existed in such a frost-throttled center as Cedar Falls. It was as though a weed-choked litter had suddenly yielded up a wonderfully developed hothouse flower.

Her eyes were bright as stars and there was the warm, pink glow of perfect health on her cheeks. She wore a trim little leather tunic, edged off with beads in the Indian fashion; her skirt was of dark blue cloth and she wore Indian moccasins, also picked out in brightly colored bead designs. Her eyebrows were thin brown pencillings above glorious lustrous eyes, and such lips as hers were never made merely to be looked at.

She paused for a moment by the broken door and then came right on into the saloon.

"What on earth is the matter in here, Mr. Henderson?" she asked. Coldwater Griff stared at her in dumb amazement.

"Who in thunder—" he demanded.

He stopped. He stopped for two totally distinct and dissimilar reasons. One was that he hadn't another word to say, the other was that any man of Coldwater Griff's type stops automatically when he feels the unmistakable press of a revolver against his side. Coldwater Griff experienced both those sensations. He also heard Masterson's voice in his ear. "Think out each sentence before you say it, you rat! No word from you that ain't to be found in a pocket dictionary."

The girl gazed around at the broken furniture, the smashed barrels, the spread-eagled form of Bully Magain.

"Mr. Henderson, won't you please tell me what all the noise was about?" she repeated. "It sounded worse than a double team dog-fight, and I'm positive I heard someone shooting."

Josh Henderson cleared his throat. "It's like this, Miss Royal," he said. "These three lumps of river junk blew in here offerin' to demonstrate some new wrastlin' holds they'd learned back at Forty Mile. The boys got a bit fresh; that's all there was. There was a bit of a rumpus and maybe a couple of whisky bottles went off bust; but I wouldn't like you to think there had been any gun-play, not in *my* saloon, miss." He ended on a note of pained surprise.

The girl regarded the motley gathering without the slightest embarrassment. "Then what is Mr. Masterson doing with a gun in his hand?" she asked.

"Me? A gun?" said Masterson in surprise. He looked at it as though completely amazed at its presence in his hand. "Say, this isn't my gun, miss; it belongs to this fellow here. They were all wrestling around together and I was sort of scared it might go off."

"Give it to me!" she said. She walked round the saloon and collected every gun she could find. Josh Henderson took them and dumped them in a drawer behind the bar.

"You can let them have them back when they've finished their little game," she said with a smile which spoke volumes. Henderson passed the back of his hand across his mouth and grinned sheepishly.

Magain slowly stirred to life on the floor. He sat up and rubbed his swollen jaws. The whisky fumes were burning in his head and he was in a fearful temper. He scrambled unsteadily to his feet and stood swaying against the wall. Suddenly he caught sight of Masterson. He stared at him for a moment as though trying to pin his groping mind down to certain realities connected with that particular individual. Then without the slightest warning he walked across the bar and, with one terrific blow on the head, knocked the Government clerk reeling out through the door.

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That time not even the presence of June Royal could prevent the riot that went thundering and crashing across the floor of the Come Inside. Josh Henderson reached over and pulled her bodily over the bar into comparative safety.

The only difference in *that* fight was that Josh Henderson had every gun in the place, but it was early evident that the Magain gang, although outnumbered four to one, was not going down without a struggle. All three of them were powerful men, heavy-thewed, deep in the chest, and were, all told, about as unprincipled a set of ruffians as one could find anywhere in the not too fastidious Klondike. All three were fighting drunk, and in ten minutes Henderson's bar was a wreck. Masterson was out of the fight altogether. His mind was still groping blindly through the white fogs of a complete knockout. He could not even hear the sounds of smashing bottles or the fierce oaths of the combatants as they struggled and fought across the floor.

Cedar Falls's terrific day had made a very promising start, but it was only a preliminary to what was still in the air.

Josh Henderson looked out of the door to see what had become of Masterson. Billy, on his hands and knees, was just beginning to get a grip on his surroundings. But it was not on him that the barkeeper's puzzled eyes were fixed. He was staring right on beyond Masterson, on past the little tin mission and the other cabins and houses, to where the trail, in a gray hairline, crawled down over the bluffs.

Two men were coming down that trail. They were trying to walk upright, trying to keep their feet in the trail. They were half-running, reeling, stumbling, staggering, tottering.

For the third time that afternoon an unconscious, involuntary hush spread through the bar. The mad scrambling and shouting ceased. The whole crowd, with heads thrust forward and eyes wide open, stared out through the door. Then a strained voice whispered, "Boys, those two guys are all in!"

Through the doorway of the Come Inside a wide stretch of snow-choked country met the eye. Coppices of spruce and fir and pine towered above little clumps of stunted cedar all the way down to the wide sweeping valley of the Yukon. Dotted among them were square, log-built cabins and a few single-story timber houses of three and four rooms with faint spirals of blue wood smoke curling up from them. Trees and ridges, cabins and houses lay inert under great loads of glittering snow. The main up-trail from Dawson to Forty Mile sidled past the cabins and continued right on to the foot of the great yellow bluffs which, stepping northward, tier on tier in ever increasing might, ultimately became the Harper Mountains.

Into that trail staggered the two humans. They were hanging on to each other, utterly dependent on the mutual support of the mutually exhausted. Their feet were dragging; bits of broken snowshoes trailed behind them on the gut thongs. Time after time they went sprawling on their faces, to lie flat for a while, before staggering up and stumbling onward. The trail they cut was a helpless zigzag, as erratic as it was pathetic. Although every step must have been an agony, they came on from sheer strength of will power alone.

The men in the Come Inside stood dumbfounded. No one moved out to help them for a reason that became obvious—one of the strangers carried a wicked looking gun which he flourished menacingly at a ring of invisible foes. With spasmodic spurts and falls they stumbled on. A hundred yards from the saloon their faces became distinguishable; a white man and an Indian. It was the Indian who flourished the gun.

The white man was far gone. His eyes were closed, and it was plain that he was moving mechanically. The stamp of starvation and high fever stood out on their faces. Only the Indian retained some semblance of consciousness. His eyes were fixed dully, but with a glare of indomitable purpose, on the doorway of the Come Inside. He was gripping the white man savagely under the arm, urging him forward, his own frame showing stark and boney through his loose hanging clothes. On they came, reeling and staggering like drunken men—drunk with the brutal delirium of long days in the wilderness of snow.

At the doorstep of the Come Inside the Indian came to a swaying standstill. He gazed uncomprehendingly around at the circle of staring faces, then gathered up the last dregs of his strength and pushed

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the white man in. The limp body staggered for a step or two and fell with a headlong crash on the whisky-soaked floor.

"My God! that's Endersley, Bob Endersley!" whispered a throaty voice. The Indian stood against the door-post waving his gun threateningly. He was unable to speak; his jaws were useless from frost-bite, but his blazing eyes were shrieking aloud the message his mouth was powerless to convey. The crowd knew that only a stubborn, tremendous determination could have brought him through.

Endersley lay like a log where he had fallen, absolutely incapable of movement. The Indian waved his gun, somberly, menacingly, at the group, while his eyes burned his message into their souls. "Look after him! Look after him and bring him round—or by the living God I'll finish the whole bunch of you!" He propped himself against the door-post and pointed toward the unconscious man on the floor.

Suddenly Henderson blurted out, "For the love of Mike, boys, look at his fists!"

A gasp and a long intake of breath rustled round the bar. Bodies bent automatically as they crowded round the fallen man; those at the back pressed forward, craning their necks to see what it was that had sent a shock through the whole saloon. They, too, gasped when they saw what was in the fallen man's hands. For Robert Endersley's frost-bitten fists were full of raw flaming gold—real, primal nugget stuff. The men who saw it stood rigid as statues, staring with feverish eyes at the fistfuls of gold. Where that stuff came from there was more—heaps and heaps more!

For a full half-minute silence reigned, then bedlam broke loose. Gold had come to Cedar Falls. None of your little tiny flecks, wrested from the earth by weary months of pan washing down at the frozen creeks, but gold in great virgin lumps that thundered aloud their own thrilling story of more where it came from! Here was a man fresh from the brooding silence of the great Out-back, with his fists full of it! Tongues babbled excitedly of a new Bonanza, an unknown Eldorado perched somewhere out there behind the mammoth heights of the Harper Mountains.

June Royal tiptoed across behind the bar and unlocked the drawer where Henderson had dumped the guns. She picked out a business-like looking weapon, and was just in time. Bully Magain and Coldwater Griff were down on their knees beside the unconscious man, savagely tearing at his furs. Bill Haines had gone lurching off to find the Indian. He stopped dead in the doorway, stopped as though shot. The Indian had vanished! Haines looked in bewilderment up and down the trail. It was empty. That was a most amazing thing, for there was no cover anywhere within two hundred yards. Considering the state the Indian was in, he could not possibly have made it. Yet the trail was empty.

He darted back into the bar. "Bully, that Siwash has given us the slip," he exclaimed. "He's melted!"

Magain grunted. "Don't matter a damn," he growled. "This guy here's bound to have a paper of some sort on him. He'll have claim papers somewhere. Inside his——"

"Stand away from that man!" An angry, indignant voice snapped the words out behind him. Bully Magain stopped searching long enough to turn and see who it was who had the temerity to hand him an order. A look of half-amused surprise came over his face when he saw June Royal standing over him. Then he saw the gun. He backed away hurriedly.

"Look out!" he gasped. "Take your finger off that trigger—it's a hair release!"

"I know it is!" she retorted defiantly. "And if it does go off, it will be pointing at you! I think the three of you had better clear out."

She followed them to the door, all three of them cursing below their breaths. The gun covered them from the doorway all the way up the trail to the bluffs. Only once they looked back—and a whirl of snow-powder spurted up two yards behind them.

The men who ate bear meat raw turned and ran.

The news of a new gold strike swept through Cedar Falls like a prairie fire. Every inhabitant of the place crowded into the barroom of the Come Inside. One of the first to arrive was Pierre Bonard, the indefatigable missionary who toiled out his days with a splendid sincerity of purpose in the little mission under the bluffs. It was typical of the man that the

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first question he asked in the Come Inside did not concern news of the fabulous gold mine, but the health of the poor soul who had found it. The atmosphere cleared a little with his advent. With his gray-white hair and dignified mien, he commanded just that little touch of respect and restraint from the frenzied miners that was badly needed.

Gold fever is a terrible thing. It magnifies a hundredfold all the selfishness, greed and brutality that exists in human nature. The men who live in the North are sons of a sturdy breed, but even they only hang on in those harsh wastes because they hope and believe their turn will come. On that hope they live. The fairy with the voice of gold is likely to whisper at any hour of the day or night.

And here they were right at hand—and for all the good it had done them they might as well be a thousand miles away. Of the two people in the whole of the universe who knew the secret of that terrific strike, one had vanished and the other was unconscious.

They hunted for the Indian high and low, but he had disappeared as completely as though the trail had opened and swallowed him up. And there was neither paper nor clue of any sort to be found on Endersley; only the maddening proof of the gold's existence, the yellow chunks Endersley had managed to bring through.

And what was far worse, Robert Endersley was likely to remain unconscious for a long time. He was snowblind, he was helpless with exhaustion and the snow-fever had got its tentacles on him. Men did not need to be told how long it would be before Endersley would be able to get a grip on his outraged faculties. They were men of the North, and they knew it would be weeks.

Small wonder that the polyglot population of Cedar Falls took the bit between its teeth when they saw the lumps of gold being pried out of Endersley's numbed hands. Loud, excited voices declared that Endersley had slammed down his pegs on the biggest deposit since McCorquodale stampeded the whole Klondike with his Nome River strike in the fifties. Hotly gesticulating miners talked wildly of dwarfing all other great strikes in Yukon history.

The only man in all Cedar Falls who was not waiting on tiptoe for the hint that would send the town stampeding away up past the Harper Mountains, was Pierre Bonard. He continued his calm, unruffled way, working toward the salvation of Endersley. He helped June Royal to get the gold lumps away from his clutching fingers. His last conscious act as they neared the Come Inside must have been to grasp them with frantic tenacity from his pack.

Bonard looked up at the girl from the unconscious bundle of skin and bone on the barroom table, and pursed his lips. "My child, he needs a nurse," he said quietly.

For a brief second their eyes met, frankly, seriously.

"Henderson is getting me some hot milk," she said. "As soon as he has had that, they are taking him over to my cabin."

The missionary bowed his head. "You may take him to the mission-house if you wish, but I think you are wisest in that matter." He put his hand on her shoulder. "You know what you are taking on your hands, don't you? It will be a long, difficult task."

June Royal lowered her eyes. "I know, Pierre," she said. "Please do not disturb yourself. I want to do it."

Thereafter, for a month, she and Pierre Bonard fought for the wanderer's life. Theirs was a great fight. They speak of it yet in Cedar Falls. For twenty-six days Endersley lay like one from whom life had fled. Smothered under a great mound of blankets, with his eyes heavily bandaged, he lay and gasped for life while the missionary and the girl worked and toiled on his numbed body.

And as he lay, with the frost devils rampaging about in his brain, he babbled of the long, killing months he had spent on trail, of the endless setbacks that had dogged him all the way down from the top-trails, of the dogs that had died off one by one, of the sled full of food that had been overwhelmed in a snow slide, of their only rifle and the way it had gone clattering down a crevasse in the Harper Mountains, of the unbelievable sequences of bad luck that had assailed them ever since they started down from the North, and of the amazing new gold strike he had made right up there where the sun-dogs dance in the noonday sky.

It wasn't so much a gold mine as a gold

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mountain—a great stark hill, a mother lode, a miracle deposit that had to be seen to be believed. Fortunes stuck out of the ground at every stride; it was the solid realization of every prospector's fairy dreams—a tremendous collection of gold pockets.

But those who waited keen-eared round the shack listening to the unconscious man's ravings, waited in vain for the clue as to its location. One hint and one only he dropped during the days he stood shouting in the fore-court of death. And that was that the name of his Indian was Sitka Charley. Through all the running babble of his talk ran a golden thread of praise for Sitka Charley. He talked for hours of his amazing endurance, his unswerving faithfulness and his extraordinary contempt for starvation.

But that was all. No more than that. There was never a word for the straining ears and the itching feet.

All through the long bitter nights while the last vicious gales of winter whined and streamed across the country, June Royal and Pierre Bonard sat up with the sick man, nursing, comforting, soothing, tending, while he lay raving of gold. Those three between them fought out a terrific battle, a wearying, exhausting battle.

There were a thousand reasons why Robert Endersley should have died. His powers of resistance and his ability to fight back had been reduced to a frayed shred; he was emaciated to the semblance of a sleeping mummy; he was fast in the grip of snow madness; he was frost bitten all over; his eyes had been burned blind by the snow glare, and there was ice in his lungs. All the laws of the North ordained that he should die.

There were two reasons why Robert Endersley should have lived. One was June Royal, the other was Pierre Bonard. Slowly, with untiring effort, they dragged him back from the courts of death. They knew that he had breasted the hill, when, on a day, his ravings ceased and he slept.

All through those painful days while spring came slowly to the wilderness, prospectors and miners went quartering up and down river trying to get on the Indian's track. Others picked up Endersley's original trail and tried to work back on it, but that effort developed into a mad race between the prospectors and the spring thaw. And the thaw won.

Endersley's eyes were still heavily bandaged the day he drifted up from the depths and called weakly for Sitka Charley. Pierre Bonard was alone in the cabin with him. Gently and with infinite tenderness he quieted his querulous questionings, and told him that Sitka Charley would come presently. He told him of his long illness and of how near he had been to death. For over an hour he talked, breaking the news gently to him. Last of all he told him that he was snow-blind, but that later on, when the darkness had had time to heal the ravaged eyes, he would probably see again. "You have been very near to the Valley of Shadows, my son," he said, "and now I want you to lie quietly and go to sleep. You know, you are still very weak, much too weak to worry yourself."

Endersley lay quiet for a long time. Then he said in a troubled voice, "Pierre, would you mind telling me again everything that you know about me—right from the day you first saw me?"

Pierre reiterated the story of what had taken place since Endersley and the Indian came stumbling into Cedar Falls.

"And you say I found a gold mine?" asked Endersley in a puzzled voice.

"You brought back handfuls of nuggets with you, my friend. They are locked in the safe custody of the Mounted at the Post."

Endersley's face was drawn and white under the bandages. There were tense, strained lines about the mouth that told of an intense mental struggle. Pierre did not like it. He patted him gently on the shoulder. "My friend, you must not tax your brain," he said. "You must not even try to think."

Endersley relaxed utterly on the bunk. "Pierre, Pierre!" he cried, "that is just my trouble. *I cannot think!* I cannot remember! All the time you have been talking I have been trying to think back to the beginning. I can't! My whole life since the spring of last year has gone. I have lost it! Oh, Pierre, fetch Sitka Charley to me!"

Pierre Bonard looked helplessly at the stricken man. How could he tell him that all Cedar Falls had been hunting and searching for his Indian; that the whole organization of the Mounted had been pressed in to the task of finding Sitka Charley and that they all had failed? How

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could he tell him that the chances were a thousand to one that his Indian was dead, that he had collapsed in the snow and died after pushing his partner into the haven of the Come Inside?

That afternoon Sergeant Norvice, of the Mounted, took certain matters into his own hands, and a placard appeared outside the Post in Cedar Falls, bearing the following announcement:

NOTICE

$500 REWARD

WILL BE PAID TO ANYONE GIVING INFORMATION THAT WILL LEAD TO THE TRACING OF THE INDIAN TRAPPER, SITKA CHARLEY. KNOWLEDGE OF HIS WHEREABOUTS IS URGENTLY DESIRED BY THE AUTHORITIES. WAS LAST SEEN HEADING UP TOWARD FORTY MILE WITHOUT FOOD OR DOGS. HE IS PROBABLY DEAD. IF SO, HIS BODY AND ALL BELONGINGS MUST BE BROUGHT TO HEADQUARTERS INTACT. OTHERWISE THIS REWARD IS WITHDRAWN.

(Signed) RALPH NORVICE,
Sergt. R. N. W. M. P.

Josh Henderson read the proclamation and tittered. Masterson, standing at his elbow, read it through twice and shrugged his shoulders. "Explains a lot, don't it?" he muttered.

"It does," assented Henderson grimly. "Reckon old Pierre must be gettin' worried about suthin'."

"Do you believe that bit about Charley?"

"What bit?"

"That bit about him being dead."

"I'm darn sure he ain't!" said Henderson emphatically. "No, sir. The sergeant has skidded when he says that. I know Charley! I did a season with him once, over in the Porcupine country, and I know the cold snap that would put Charley's fires out hasn't happened yet. He's a hideful of old nails, whipcord and gristle, held together by big lumps of disinclination to talk, that's what he is. And they think he's dead? Don't make me laugh! That Indian is lying doggo. He's waiting for his boss to mend."

Masterson looked at the notice again and frowned. "Can't understand Norvice doing a fool thing like that," he muttered.

The news that a reward was out for Charley went through the camp in half a minute. One or two of the miners who had begun to put Endersley's ravings down to madness repacked their stampeding kits, hung them handy on the nail behind the door and waited for things to happen.

For Sitka Charley was a known character along the Canadian end of the Yukon. They knew him for one of the best hunters west of the Rockies, and they gave him credit for possessing a keener, shrewder brain than many white men. To them, Charley's silence proved beyond all doubt that Endersley really had struck something big up there beyond Five Fingers. It also proved the futility of posting up notices to find his dead body. The longer Masterson looked at that notice the more it tickled him, and he chuckled.

He felt a bone-hard hand on his shoulder, and a hard, uncompromising voice behind him said, "What's the matter with my notice, Billy?"

Masterson screwed his head round and found himself gazing into the eyes of Norvice of the Mounted. And there was a bitter glimmer in those eyes set in the face of the old hawk of the mountains. It was the face of a man who had seen a lot of things and knew a lot more, a strong, wind-bronzed face. "What's the matter with it?" he reiterated.

Masterson placed a finger on the, "He is probably dead." "I think that is damn funny," he said bluntly.

"Come over here," said Norvice, drawing him away from the excited group round the board.

"Now look here, Masterson," he said when they were well beyond earshot. "It is highly probable that you will have to lend a hand on this job before it's finished. Have you seen anything of the Magain gang in your recent runs up and down river?"

"No. Not for some days."

"That's about so. They're missing. The whole bunch of 'em's melted. And when the devil's invisible, he's hatching trouble."

"I expect they're up at——"

"Forget it. They're neither up at Forty Mile nor down at Dawson, and none of the camps in between has seen anything of them for a week. It generally happens that when that gang fades out of one camp, I hear all about it inside twenty-four hours—generally a frantic hurry call from some little joint

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that has just been cleaned up. By the time we get a posse there, they are back again with a sheaf of alibis a mile high. But this time they've been gone over a week."

"D'ye mean that——?"

"I mean that I've put urgent inquiries through to every camp and village within a hundred miles and drawn blank everywhere. The whole bunch is missing."

"Well?"

"And so is Sitka Charley!"

"Whe-e-w! Then you think the Magain gang has——?"

"I said they're missing. Also I've lost Sitka Charley. And nothing has happened anywhere, not even a hold-up for dust and drinks over at the Crossings. I want the Magain bunch badly. I've got warrants for them all over that Come Inside hold-up, but this is much more serious. By the way, have you heard the latest news from June Royal's shack?"

"No."

"Endersley's memory has gone phut!"

Masterson jumped. "Wha-at?" he gasped.

"That's right. The snow fever has blanked out a whole year of his life—the year that matters. He can't get a line on a single day of this last twelve months, nor anything he has done, nor where he has been. He's a millionaire—without a million!"

"Hell!"

"You said it. It puts the whole bag o' tricks right in the hands of Sitka Charley. He's the king-pin of the whole affair. Hence that notice. If he's free he will get to hear of it and he will come to me. He will know that I'm working for his boss. If not, it will mean that the Magains have corralled him."

"Then heaven help the Magains!" said Masterson fervently.

"One Indian can't fight that bunch of cutthroats and get away with it."

"That so? Well, you don't know Charley. I do!"

"I, at least, have a slight acquaintance—with the Magain gang," said Norvice.

"Maybe, but they won't kill him. Charley's death won't do 'em any good."

"Any one of that crowd would do murder for no more than that 500 dollars reward."

"They've got bigger game than that."

"Big? I'd say it's about ten times bigger than anyone here knows!"

"Eh?"

"Sure. There's a good dozen toughs hanging around this place. They're all working for a shady Skagway syndicate; they're waiting to snap up as many claims as they can lay their hands on. Bully is out for quick money. He will try to force the location of Endersley's strike from the Indian, pass the word along to the syndicate agents, and net so much for each claim they collar. If the syndicate get first stakes down, Cedar Falls won't see a cent of it. But you'd better keep all this under your hat for a day or so. Get me?"

IT IS a remarkable fact, but nevertheless true, that Sitka Charley at that precise moment was doing his valiant best to justify the tremendous regard Billy Masterson had for his fighting qualities. He was sitting with his back to the wall in the little ramshackle cabin up among the great limestone bluffs that hedged the settlement. The cabin was one of the Magain gang's secret meeting places. It was hidden away under the shadow of a great overhanging bluff, perched precariously on a little jutment halfway down a precipice. All around rose the roar of Cedar Falls, thundering down in white cataracts of milky foam into the cold Yukon below. In front of Sitka Charley sat Bully Magain, eyeing him vindictively across a crudely built table.

On the table Magain laid an automatic. He placed it with the muzzle pointing in a direct line at Sitka Charley's breast, the butt within a foot of his own hand. For a minute he sat and watched him, critically considering his man. He folded his arms on the table, a flicker of contempt in his eyes.

The Indian looked back at him unemotionally.

Bully Magain spoke. He thrust his bull head forward and coldly and deliberately insulted the Indian. "Siwash!" he said viciously. "Speak English?"

The Indian's eyes flickered once. To call a Sitka a Siwash is to offer him the deepest insult a white man's tongue can utter. The Indian pressed his elbow ever so gently into his side. The bulgy lump inside his furs gave him infinite contentment.

"Where did you get to that time at the Come Inside?" asked Magain. He spoke softly, but there was a stream of steel arrows in his voice.

"I went behind the saloon; I climbed the fence; my people found me. They were waiting for me and they nursed me according to their own ways. White peo-

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ple would have given me brandy; and my tongue would have chattered words I did not wish it to." Sitka Charley's voice was impassive.

"Well, Siwash, your tongue is going to wag right now!" Magain assured him.

The Indian hugged his invisible gun.

"What have you done with Endersley's claim paper?" demanded Magain.

"Endersley had no claim paper!"

"That's a lie."

"I have not got it."

"Then where is it? Endersley hasn't it!"

"Endersley may have hidden it when he knew he was going snow-mad."

Magain gritted his teeth. "Listen to me, you swab," he snarled. "There is room in your chest for every bullet in this gun, and unless your tongue wags you will get 'em! You're eight miles away from help. There ain't a living soul nearer to you than Cedar Falls down there in the valley—except me. Now, you know just where that gold strike is located and, what's more, right now you are going to open your face and tell me."

The Indian looked as though the information were news to him.

"I don't understand you," he said doggedly.

Magain picked up the gun. "I'll explain," he said acidly. There was a red blaze in his eyes and his lips were drawn tightly across his yellow teeth. "I don't care a chew of tobacco whether you go out of this shack by the door or over the Falls, nor whether you go out with your skin punctured or otherwise. That's up to you. But this much I do know. I tell you, Siwash, if you want to go out of here alive, you are going to tell me where Rob- Endersley found gold up beyond Five Fingers. All I want is the location; it won't make any odds to you. Your boss gets his own claim if he records it in time, but that, too, is up to you. If you don't tell me, I'll shoot. Either you have got that claim paper on you or you have not—it don't make any odds to me either way. But you know where the gold is. And understand, I won't allow no yellow dog of a Siwash to put it over me! Either you wag your tongue right now, or it won't wag again."

"If I tell you, you will shoot. If I give you the claim paper, you will shoot. What will it benefit me?"

"Then you have got it!"

"I had it—now I have not. You may shoot me if you will. Your first bullet will doubtless kill me. It matters little. But it will also destroy the claim paper."

Magain looked suspiciously at the Indian. "What do you mean?" he growled.

"I mean one thing. You were foolish when you laid your gun on the table. You did it to frighten me, but it did not frighten. Instead, it was helpful to me. You did not use your eyes; you were too busy glaring at me. While your gun was lying on the table pointing at me, I slid the paper, rolled up, down the muzzle."

"What?" A look of utter incredulity flashed into Bully Magain's face. Unbelieving, he twisted the gun round and squinted into the barrel. He did it intuitively, in a flash, as any man would. And in that flash it happened.

Sitka Charley suddenly galvanized into action.

"Up with them!" The words were short. Magain's startled eyes whipped across to the Indian. Sitka Charley, his eyes aflame, was on his feet, and Magain found himself gazing amazedly up the barrel of another gun—the Sitka's gun, a compact pound-and-a-half of glimmering steel, lead and cordite. It pointed, without a flicker, at the spot in his head where nose and forehead met.

"Drop your gun, white man." The Indian's voice was full of purpose. "If you move a muscle except to open your fingers, I shoot!" he rasped.

For some seconds they looked at each other, then Magain accepted the inevitable.

"Very clever, you red devil, very clever," he growled. "I reckon——"

He stopped, and a ghost of a smile passed over his face. His tension relaxed. From outside there came a scrambling sound. It came nearer and lower, the sound of heavy boots clambering down the bluff.

Magain grinned. "That wil be Bill Haines and Coldwater Griff," he announced. "Good health, Siwash!"

II

THE knowledge that he had completely lost all count of the last year of his life came as a stunning shock to Robert Endersley. The realization that he had found a gigantic gold deposit some-

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where in that blank in his memory brought him dangerously near to the verge of collapse.

For hours he lay and fought his torpid brain for the key-thoughts that would restore that year to his fevered mental grasp. In spite of Pierre Bonard's remonstrances, he worried and harried his brain till the missionary began to fear for the return of a high fever. With strained intensity he forced his mind back along the broken trails of memory.

He no longer lay helpless in June Royal's shack on the fringe of Cedar Falls. He was no longer in the sun-drenched spring at all. He had flung himself back headlong into the winter.

He stood again on the wide, white plains that sprawl away to the skyline beyond the sullen battlements of the Harper Mountains; he clawed his way again across the leagues of wilderness that roll back to the Yukon from the Five Fingers, gashed across and across by ice-choked ravine and towering ironstone ridge. He marvelled again at the dogged endurance of Sitka Charley as they struggled desperately through the gales and blizzards streaming endlessly down from the Polar seas. The blizzards blanketed the whole sweep of Alaska and then suddenly made way for a cold-snap so vicious and prolonged that it burned right into his brain.

There had been a degree of coldness so profound that the air quivered; the atmosphere crackled. He recollected trying to light a fire the night his memory went. He remembered struggling with a match, but after that his mind became a confused and painful blur of whining blizzards, roaring drifts, calm cold snaps, amazingly dispassionate Indians, and camp-fires, built on the open trail, that stung his nostrils with their acrid smoke.

He tossed about on the bunk, muttering fretfully, the broken strands persistently eluding his straining grasp.

Pierre Bonard sat and watched him with troubled eyes. Endersley's mutterings took on a high-strung note and Bonard got up and went over to him.

"My son, I have warned you against taxing your brain," said the missionary with a touch of asperity underlying the kindliness in his voice. "I have begged you to try to sleep. Are our labors of a long, weary month to be swept away in an hour because you will not exercise a little patience!"

The sick man lay back and sighed. He was silent for a long while. His hands plucked nervously at the coverlet and then crept up to his bandaged eyes.

"Pierre, I am not ungrateful," he pleaded. "But you don't understand—you cannot understand. Old friend, your ways and mine lie too far apart. You can't realize what it means to a man out on trail—to know that he has beaten fate, played the game through to the finish, found his gold—and lost it again."

"My son, I think I understand—a little."

"But you have never been tormented by the call of the gold voice; never battled your way through killing months on unbroken trails; never dreamed your dreams—and seen them turn into a nightmare—like this!"

"Robert Endersley, I thought you a man. You talk with the petulance of a child."

"Pierre, I tell you again. I am not ungrateful. I can never repay you for what you have done for me. I am no chechako in the North—I know what I owe you! Such a miracle as yours was not wrought by hours on your hands and knees before the altar. You——"

The missionary smiled. There was just a shade of irony in his voice. "The Indians in these parts have a proverb"; he said. "Prayer to the gods is good for the crops, but one must hoe while the smoke goes up!"

"That—that just about fits my—our case, Pierre. A lot of hoeing and a little smoke."

"Not so, my son; a lot of each, a lot of each."

The voices droned off into silence. It was one of those little silences that happen so often when one is about to ask a difficult question and does not quite like to broach the matter. Endersley broke it at length.

"Pierre?" There was a note in his voice that caused the missionary uneasiness.

"Well?"

"Why don't you send for Sitka Charley?"

"He will come, my son."

"Certainly he will, but why don't you send for him now?"

"Probably something delays him, my son."

The sick man twisted round in the bunk. "Pierre!" he cried. "You don't mean you

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don't know where he is? Pierre, don't tell me Charley is gone!"

The missionary laid a soothing hand on Endersley's shoulder. "Now, now, my friend," he said softly. "You are getting excited again. You mustn't do it. There is nothing to worry about. Sitka Charley went away. I think he did a wise thing. Maybe he went where white men couldn't find him. It is possible he went back to the lodges of his own people."

"Yes, but Pierre——"

"Sh! Sh! You must surely realize that all Cedar Falls has been out hunting for your Indian? This little settlement has been a powder mine ever since you came down from the North. They are all intoxicated with the lust for gold. The Indian has done well to stay away. There are lawless characters in Cedar Falls who would—but no matter. The Mounted are advertising for him. He will come."

"Sure, Pierre. He will come. Sitka Charley never let me down yet."

"He did a wonderful thing for you, my friend, when he brought you down."

"He has been doing wonderful things for me ever since he picked up double harness with me, Pierre!"

"He thinks a great deal of you, Endersley."

Endersley laughed, an amused, satisfied little chuckle that came out from underneath his bandages. It carried with it the assurance that that particular little joke was a matter of perfect understanding between himself and the Sitka.

"He can meet you on your own ground, Pierre, as a man and not a lesser breed. He's got a brain, as fighting as it's faithful."

"I delight to hear you say it. I thought that the whites, with their bottles and their cards and their eternal lusting for gold had ended the better traits in their red brothers."

"He's white inside—all white," said Endersley.

The missionary got up to put more logs in the stoves; and as he sat listening to the sputtering of the resin a grim, reminiscent smile stole over his features. He cleared his throat and glanced across at the man on the bunk.

"Robert Endersley, my young friend, I will tell you something," he said. "But a moment ago you told me I could not understand, could not sympathize with your feelings when you knew your memory had gone—you with your fabulous mountain of gold, and your memory that will not tell you where it is. You said, my friend, that our ways were too far apart."

"Did I?"

"Yes. You inferred that I, a mere minister of God, had no right to speak to you of matters connected with such great things as you have known and done."

"Well, I suppose I meant it—in a way," said Endersley lamely.

The missionary broke into a dry little chuckle, half of sadness, half of amusement.

"My friend," he said, "I, Pierre Bonard, minister of God, I, who know nothing of a strong man's emotions and despairs when he strikes gold—and loses it—I missed staking my claim on the second great Nome strike by fifteen paltry hours."

"Good Lord!"

"That was in the long ago, when my muscles were limber, and my ears, too, were tuned to catch the whisper of the gold voice."

"Oh, Pierre, old man, I am sorry. A thousand times sorry. I—I cannot tell you how——"

"Why sorry? I offer you no sympathy. I cannot. I have been burned in that crucible myself; I know the fierceness of its pains. Let us forget it. We meet as brothers, owning to a common knowledge."

The sick man made a valiant effort to turn the conversation. "Pierre," he said, "I smell flowers."

"There are bunches at your head and by your side—every color and variety the North knows. Twice a day we fill them afresh—wild thyme, jasmines, wild pinks and star-flowers." He laughed gaily. "My son, were you able to see, you would scarce know this cabin for a Yukon shack. There are curtains at the windows, Robert! There is a coverlet on your bunk, all worked out in pretty bead patternings. A screen of bear fur shades the light of the window from your eyes; there are rugs on the floor. Flowers and scented herbs are dotted round on every ledge and sill."

Endersley laughed. "It's tremendously good of you to go to so much trouble, Pierre," he said. "I can hardly imagine a miner's cabin looking like that; I shall better appreciate it when my bandages are off. I had no idea you were skilled with a woman's craft as well as being a minister to your flock and a reformed gold prospector."

"I?" The missionary sat up with a jerk, then went over to the sick man. For a moment he looked down at the sightless bundle, a slight frown puckering his fore-

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head, then sat down on the edge of the bunk.

"I am sorry; I ought to have told you," he said quietly. "I thought you knew."

"Knew what, Pierre?"

"It seems I have been acting a lie, my son. You have been under the impression that I alone, with the help of Providence, was responsible for bringing you back from the shadows?"

"I—I certainly had a notion that way."

"Would you care to know there has been another with you here, day and night, never leaving you, doing more for you each hour that I could do each day?"

"You surprise me, Pierre, but trot him out. Don't be so horribly mysterious about it."

"It isn't a him, my son, it's a woman."

"Good Lord!"

"You seem surprised. You surely know there are women to be found among the Yukon Valley?"

"Ye-yes, surely, but not—not the sort who think of scented flowers for a sick man's room."

The missionary patted his arm. "A pretty thought, my son, and one worthy of the girl who has done so much for you—indeed, the sweetest girl that ever came from Outside."

"What is her name?"

"June Royal."

"That—that isn't a name, Pierre—it's a trickle of music."

"Nevertheless, that is her name. Even so, it does barely do her justice."

Endersley relaxed on the bunk muttering, "June Royal, eh? June Royal!" He lingered over the words. "Pierre, what is she like, this girl with music in her name?"

"She is like her name, my son—beautiful. There is just a trace of the Quebec-French in her, just enough to give her that little—but you are no ladies' man, you always say. You would not be interested in such details."

Endersley declared his complete dissatisfaction with such an assumption.

"If you don't tell me all about her, I'll get up off this bunk and tear my bandages off," he threatened.

"You impose a pleasant task, my son," said the missionary. "June Royal is a rose and a lily come to life. Cedar Falls is at her feet. Since June Royal came here this settlement has come as near to being well behaved as any Yukon settlement will ever be. She is as feminine as her name, yet her young body is strong and fearless. I have seen her hit each spot on the five of spades with a revolver at thirty yards."

"Gee!" said the bandages on the bunk.

"For twenty-seven nights and days that girl has been to you a nurse beyond the greatness of a mother to her ailing son. I cannot tell you all she has done. I do not know. I have crept in now and then to watch you while she took a few hours' rest in a chair at the foot of your bunk. And she has fought the rest of Cedar Falls for you, my son. Ears have been pressing against these walls ever since you were laid on that bunk shouting and babbling of gold—ears that were waiting for you to tell them where your gold was to be found. Some have tried taunting her to force your secret from her, but if the angels themselves had come down out of heaven and joined in the general wagging of tongues, June Royal would have stayed on here, with you!"

"Pierre, my debt to that girl piles itself up every second!"

"It does indeed!"

"Where is she now?"

"Sleeping."

"Where?"

"At the mission. She is worn out. This morning, when your soul came back from its wandering across the infinities, she went down to the mission to get some sleep."

"Is she coming back?"

"I don't think so. Now you must be quiet and go to sleep. You must show your gratitude to her by getting well quickly—and giving her back her cabin."

The light was weakening. Long shadows were sliding back out of the west. Soon it would be twilight, the soft, gentle twilight of the North, and when dusk came, Pierre Bonard was to take off the bandages from Endersley's injured eyes. Then was the sick man to know whether his eyes had gone as well as his memory.

Half an hour passed; the shadows crawled slowly up the wall of the cabin and as slowly faded in the gathering dusk.

The missionary got up off his knees. He touched Endersley on the arm. "Are you awake, my son—are you ready?" he asked.

"I—I've been waiting for you, Pierre."

The missionary began to unfasten the bandages. Deftly and gently his fingers

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played round the sick man's head, refolding each bandage as he unwound it. When only three folds remained, he stopped.

"Shall I go on, my friend?"

Endersley nodded; his hands were gripping the coverlet feverishly.

Bonard unwound two more folds, slowly and with infinite care. Only one fold remained and the missionary asked, "Can you see anything yet? Do you notice any difference in the light?"

"Not — a— not a thing, Pierre!" Endersley's voice was dead level.

"Can you *now?*"

"No!"

The missionary trembled a little. The last fold was off.

Endersley lay back on the pillows, breathing in little hurried jerks. Bonard tried to speak, tried to say something that would tell Endersley a little of the torrent of sympathy coursing through his soul. But the words would not come. He went over to the window, propped his arms on the sill, and stared out into the dusk to where the great Yukon slid like a mammoth ribbon of satin and silver into the purple afterglow of the sunset.

"Pierre?"

"Yes, my son?"

"Would you—do me a favor—please?"

Bonard turned away from the window. "I would give you the sight from one of my own eyes were it possible." The old man's voice was pregnant with the deep sadness of a burning sincerity.

Endersley looked up and smiled, an odd, confused, half-ashamed smile.

"I—I don't mind about this—this business—as much as all that, old chap," he said with an effort at cheerfulness. "My sight will come back all right; snow-blindness isn't permanent, you know. It will come back—as sure as Sitka Charley will come back."

"That is a brave way to take such a blow as this, my son."

"Don't worry about it, Pierre. I want to—to ask you something. You see, I—I've an idea that—that Miss June Royal will be coming back here tonight."

"Maybe, son, maybe. You don't mind?"

"No, but, Pierre; could I—er——?"

"What is it, son?"

Endersley took his courage in both hands. *"Can I have a shave?"* he said.

Secure in the knowledge that Endersley couldn't see him, the minister of God grinned; then chuckling hugely to himself, he went down to the mission and fetched his razors. Between them they cut whiskers and soaped and lathered and shaved until even Endersley was satisfied.

"Endersley," said the missionary, after he had cleared away the traces of the invalid's toilette, "you must have your eyes bandaged again. Just for a week, my son, no more. Perhaps by then they——"

"Not yet, Pierre, not yet," said Endersley hurriedly. He was looking more confused than ever. "Leave them for a little while. The bandages make my head ache. Tomorrow——"

He broke off on a word. The latch of the door had clicked. A slow flush mounted his cheeks; he turned his head instinctively toward the door. Slowly and silently it opened. June Royal, as adorable a picture of feminine loveliness as ever the North delighted in, stood framed in the doorway. Her eyes, full of eager, leaping, solicitous questions for her patient's welfare, were turned full on Bonard. She knew that Endersley's bandages were to be taken off that night and every atom of her was asking for news.

But her questions were answering themselves. For a moment she looked swiftly from the missionary to the man on the bunk and back again. Then she hurried into the cabin.

"Oh, Pierre, not blind!" she whispered. "Oh, surely, not blind!" Her breath was coming and going as rapidly as though she had been running.

Pierre Bonard muttered and turned his head away as she turned quickly to the man on the bunk.

Endersley turned his head toward her. Her own eyes, lustrous and burning with sympathy, sought his and held them; with a little womanly gesture of friendship she sat on the bunk close to him and took his hands in a warm, impulsive clasp. For a full minute neither said a word. She looked into his strained, unflickering eyes as though striving to pierce the hurt in them. Slowly she bent her head, closer, closer. Because she knew there was a great black darkness behind those eyes, because she knew they could not see what she did, she bent right down to him and her lips touched his hair.

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Just for a second she sat, and then her color came mounting up in waves until her cheeks were scarlet.

For Robert Endersley had begun to smile, and she was aware, all in a palpitating second that Endersley was looking at her with *eyes that saw,* eyes that embraced every inch of her with honest admiration.

"Perfect — glorious — and absolutely wonderful!" he whispered.

June Royal snatched her hands away in a riotous tumult of chagrin, joy, mortification and relief. She sprang off the bunk, with a look of astonished dismay on her face that was so obvious as to be almost laughable.

"You—you—you utter scamp!" she gasped. "Oh, you wicked, deceitful humbug!"

Pierre Bonard wheeled in amazement. The tableau that met his eyes was clear, sufficient and illuminating.

June Royal was standing away from the bunk, blushing to the roots of her hair. She was staring at Robert Endersley, who had incontinently taken flight under the bedclothes where he was laughing hugely and delightedly.

For some seconds she remained staring at the mound of shaking bedclothes, then Pierre Bonard caught her eyes—which were laughing.

"Well, Pierre, what do you know about that?" she demanded, and Endersley, emerging from the bedclothes, mentally told himself that he had never heard anybody with a voice like that before in all his life.

The missionary's reply never came. There was an interruption. A fourth person entered. As boldly as when the Magain gang made their startling appearance at the Come Inside, the door was violently opened. Furthermore, it was violently slammed again. But in the single second that elapsed between the opening and the slamming, the entrant was fair and squarely in the room. He stood with his back to the door, a blue-glimmering automatic in his hand and a dogged look in his eyes. Those eyes, black, shrewd and piercing, ranged the cabin in a brief analytical second. Short he was, and wiry, red-brown as a chestnut, and about his head was the white band of the Sitka chiefs.

"Charley! Come in, old scout. I— I've been waiting for you!" Endersley was sitting up on the bunk, bright-eyed.

The Indian walked right up to the bunk. He utterly ignored June Royal and the missionary; he had already placed them as "safe." He slid his gun out of sight and held out his hand to Endersley. "Me glad," he announced.

Inside the shack the light was dim. The Indian stood for a moment in the circle of firelight thrown from the open maw of the Yukon stove, and looked speculatively at Endersley for a little while, felt his limbs to see how he was building, then jerked a casual finger over his shoulder toward June Royal.

"She pull you round?" he asked.

Endersley pulled the Indian's head down to the level of his mouth and whispered in his ear, long and earnestly. When he had finished, Sitka Charley straightened up, looked hard at the girl, and delivered his verdict.

"Very good gal," he declared, and fetched a stool from a corner and sat down.

"I am come," he said, "to talk of many things and of one thing. Many things can wait, but of one thing I will talk to you—tonight!" He addressed himself solely to Endersley. The others seemed to have faded completely from his mind.

Endersley proppd himself up on one elbow and nodded. "Sure, Charley. Sergeant Norvice of the Mounted has been chasing round for you. You see, I'm told I found a number-one gold mine somewhere in the back-end of our last run, but the cold got me. My memory went back on me, and I don't know a blamed thing about it, and——"

"I've seen Norvice, one half-hour ago. I could not come sooner. Las' week I was coming, but a man—he call himself Magain—he took me one night as I sat at my camp-fire on the bluffs."

"What?"

"But I got away," continued the Indian imperturbably.

"But did he——?"

"I told him nothing! All I told him was —I had a gun, too. He didn't know. He was very surprised. Bimeby 'long came two of his friends. I made Bully Magain get under the table. I got under with him, quick, all very quick. I pushed my gun in his ear, and he didn't move when

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his two friends looked in. It was very dark in the corner under the table; their eyes were strained from the glare outside. All they said was, 'Not there, damn him!' And they went away. Bimeby I went away, too."

Endersley was grinning broadly. Out of the corner of his eye he could see June Royal. Her face was all bewitchingly puckered up with delighted appreciation.

"I come to tell you where we find our gold! Eh?"

"That's the idea, Charley. Maybe if you tell me the yarn as it happened, my memory will pick up its stride again. Pierre, Miss Royal, will you please sit down, and maybe you good people can put the main questions to Charley if he gets off the track."

The Sitka folded his arms in his lap. Slowly and impassively he began his story. His voice, a slow monotonous rumble, echoed somberly through the cabin.

"'Twas seven months ago that the frost devils entered you, seven months ago that your tongue first began babbling of things that were beyond belief. We were camped on an unmade trail six days dog-run above Five Fingers. The cold was such that even I was cold. We journeyed on by way of Nanayak's and Ace High, by way of Bonehead Creek and the Great Fish River. You would not rest: ever your demand was that we push ahead. Over the Teslin Pass we went, over and beyond into the Koyukuk Flats, where the great winds drone ever from the northeast. One by one the dogs died. All save Sunnygold. Sunnygold survived. She, the finest dog I have ever led, refused to die. Lean and starving, the last of our team, you would not kill her. You drove her away. We could have lived many days on the meat that was still on her bones, lived and grown strong again. Yet you would not have her killed. I am pleased we did not eat."

Endersley was growing wildly excited. "Yes, yes. Go on!" he breathed. "It's coming back—it's coming back. Go on, Charley."

"By long and devious ways we came at last to the Nahoni country, which is a savage country. Three great mountains rear up from the range that bars the entrance. We christened them the Three Captains. By the third one on the right we found our gold! A small hill, a foothill, lying in the hollow at the foot of the right hand Captain, stood between us. You stumbled as we climbed it. You slipped. You slid into a cup where the snow had not penetrated, a small crevasse which pointed south. In that crevasse you found gold. Unending stores of it.

"There we shall find our gold again. There in the crevasse that points southward in the cup of the little hill that stands under the southern shadow of the last of the Three Captains. There our great wealth——"

June Royal's hand slid across his mouth. Without surprise, without emotion, the Sitka turned and looked at her. A forefinger was pressed warningly to her lips, in her eyes an urgent appeal for silence. The cabin suddenly became deathly silent. From outside came a faint noise, a mere scratch, near the door.

June Royal rose, silent as a shadow. On tiptoe she crossed to the door and flung it open. Outside, with leering, ironical grins on their faces, stood Bully Magain, Bill Haines and Coldwater Griff, crouching, with their ears to the crack in the door jamb.

They straightened up. With a coarse laugh Magain raised his hat. "Good evening to you, lady," he said.

Coldwater Griff's gun was out in a flash. "Hey, Siwash! Up with 'em!" he yelled.

Sitka Charley's hand had been slowly crawling toward his jacket. Bonard whispered in his ear and the Indian, without a flicker of annoyance, put his hands, palms upward, on the bunk.

"Boys, I'm obliged to you!" Magain spat his respects on the floor. "So that little gold stake is over by Nahoni, is it, Siwash? Stuck in a crevasse in the foothill at the bottom of the right-hand mountain as you go north, eh? Allow me to thank you. And while I'm at it, I'll correct your geography. Men who go round the top trails ought to know the correct lay of the land. Them three mountains ain't the Three Captains. Their right name is the Toreadors. I know that country well! G'night, folks!"

They turned on their heels and went brazenly out into the night. June Royal stood by the doorway stunned.

Over by the bunk Sitka Charley looked at Endersley and Pierre Bonard looked at them both. An absolute silence reigned, the silence of helplessness. The Indian,

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with his head screwed round, watched the three men running down the footpath. In a couple of minutes they were at the foot of the bluffs, climbing rapidly up the narrow track that led over the top to the open country beyond.

June Royal closed the door listlessly, Pierre Bonard sighed heavily. He looked at Endersley. "My friend," he said, "fate seems to be dealing you some heavy blows."

Endersley shrugged his shoulders. "Couldn't be foreseen, couldn't be helped," he muttered. "Just sheer bad luck. Charley couldn't help that. Who'd know that gang of cutthroats would risk their necks in Cedar Falls?"

Bonard coughed. "Shall I spread the news in Cedar Falls—shall I hurry down to the Post? Norvice might be there. He could get his men up by——"

Endersley shook his head slowly. "Not a chance," he said. "Those devils will be over the bluffs and heading up toward Nahoni inside two hours. They and their crowd will clean the place up before Norvice could get his nose in. Magain has got us beat."

Sitka Charley stirred and glanced up toward June Royal, who had come over and put her hand on his shoulder.

"Have they gone—gone past coming back?" he asked.

She nodded. "I—I'm afraid so, Charley," she said miserably.

The Indian faced round at Endersley again. In a dead flat voice he said, "I do not like those men. Tonight they are starting out for the Nahoni Mountains, which are more than two hundred miles to the north. I wish them a peaceful journey." A fierce glitter shone in his eyes for a tiny second and then vanished. "For they will find no gold at the end of it," he went on. "Now, listen well, for I will tell you where it was we found our gold!"

III

SERGEANT RALPH NORVICE of the Mounted sat in his matchboard office at the Post critically examining a dozen fat lumps of yellow metal—gold.

Norvice picked up the biggest nugget, a lump of about ten or twelve ounces. On the table lay an open strongbox, containing the other yellow lumps together with his own official account of the amazing advent of Robert Endersley to Cedar Falls. It was now well along into the short summer of the North, and already the Endersley story was in the running to make Klondike history.

Already the long pale twilight of the Northern night was crawling across the summer grandeur of the Yukon Valley, and an odorous lamp swinging overhead, splashed sparks of liquid fire on the gold.

Norvice studied the lump with the calculating eye of a man who knew what gold was, as distinct from what it ought to be. Fifteen years in the North and ten with the Mounted had tempered him to the point of a chronic unbeliever. His sourness was the sourness of a man to whom every day has brought its own fresh disillusionment. Under that pendant lamp, his harsh eyes staring at the lump of someone else's gold, Norvice appeared as the perfectly developed product of the system which makes one man a law-maker and the next a law-breaker. He had rubbed shoulders, spring, summer, fall and winter with the best and the worst, and his verdict was that the best were only good because it suited them and because the Mounted had a confoundedly long arm. The worst are bad because they don't give a hoot for anyone this side of hell.

He threw the nugget back on the table and glared at it.

"Laugh, you yellow devil!" he said. "Go on, kid yourself you're making a fool of me, but I'm Norvice, madam, Norvice of the Mounted, and you won't send me stampeding up beyond Five Fingers with a gold pan in my itching hands. No, ma'am, I——"

He drew his gun and pointed it at the doorway. "Come in!" he shouted.

Henderson entered, Henderson of the Come Inside.

"'Evenin', Sergeant," he said. "Just got hold of some news. Thought you ought to know."

Norvice put his feet on the table and lolled back in his chair. He twisted a long cigar into a corner of his mouth.

"Shoot," he said. "Trying to start something? Tell me you've seen Sitka Charley sneaking into Cedar Falls. Tell me you've watched him come crawling down out of the bluffs and make for June Royal's cabin. Tell me he went in and started spieling the complete narrative of

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the year Endersley can't remember. Tell me you saw the Magain gang foxing along behind him. Tell me they're up at June's shack now, listening to Sitka Charley's yarn."

Henderson stared at him. "Who the thunder'n hell told you?" he shouted.

"A little bird about the size of a Sitka."

Henderson swallowed twice, then a flare of anger sprang into his voice.

"Then what are you doin' around here?" he blazed. "Why ain't you rustlin' a crowd of the boys up to corral the outfit? You got warrants for 'em all, ain't you? Why don't you rope 'em in? What's up—skeered?"

Slowly the cigar came out of Norvice's mouth. Slower still his feet came off the table and he stood up.

"What?" he said.

The older man eyed the six foot of bone and muscle for a moment, speculatively, but there was still an unrepentant poise about him when he said, "Look a-here, Mr. Policeman. Las' time that string of hoboes struck Cedar Falls they landed in my bar, and their visit cost me two thousand dollars. I haven't finished puttin' on all the patches yet. Here, gimme your gun! I'll go across and pump the skunks so full of lead you'll want a derrick to lift their coffins."

Norvice switched his gun out of reach. "Easy," he growled. "There's only one thing worse than short sight and that's stone blindness. That Indian isn't telling 'em anything that will make 'em rich. He's relieving himself of a bunch of dope that will send Magain, Haines and Coldwater Griff up toward the Nahoni Mountains. They will be taking the whole crowd of Skagway agents up there with them. I want to fix that bunch of thieving stiffs as well as the Magains. If we get them shifted off the skyline for a week or two, maybe it will give Cedar Falls miners a chance to get their stakes in big on the Endersley strike."

"Oh!" Henderson's spurt of anger seemed to have cooled.

"Yes, 'oh!' you irritable old mule. Up to date I've only got the Magains on half a dozen small counts, some of which I can't prove and for some of which they'll have all sorts of alibis. I figure that if we can keep 'em on the jump till Endersley is strong enough to hit the trail again, we can land 'em all for something big. Besides, Endersley wants a whack at 'em himself."

"Oh," said Henderson again, sliding gracefully off the high-horse by picking up one of the nuggets and asking, with a great civility, "This Endersley's specimen stuff?"

"Yep. A1 all through. Endersley says that pockets of that stuff are lying around up there as thick as cherries in a pie, and those nuggets been reminding me about it every night since Sitka Charley brought him down. Terrible stuff, gold, when it starts talking."

Henderson cast an appraising eye over the specimens. "There's thirteen of them," he said.

"So I noticed—some time ago," said Norvice grimly. "Somebody's goin' to be unlucky on this strike. I was just saying, when you came in, that it won't be me!"

Both men turned slowly and faced round to the opposite wall whereon was pinned a group picture of three men. Three ugly scowling faces looked out of that photograph, and the placard was headed *Wanted!* A caption gave the names to the rest of the law-abiding world—Bully Magain, Coldwater Griff and Bill Haines.

Norvice's eyes narrowed. "Good health, gentlemen," he said. "You'll need it!"

Henderson plucked at his sleeve and pointed out through the doorway. In the pale twilight three heavy figures could be made out running away from June Royal's shack. Buffalo-like humps on their backs told their own tale of kits already packed for a quick getaway.

The saloon keeper watched them go. For a minute he waited with a troubled frown over his eyes, then he muttered, "Well, where's the gal? Why ain't she with 'em?"

Norvice looked at him quickly. "What girl?" he asked.

"Nell—she was with 'em when they was trailing down after the Sitka."

"What?" Norvice shot the word out.

"Sure she was. Trailing off behind 'em as though she was one of the bunch herself."

"Hell! Stay here till I get back, Josh." Norvice, running toward June Royal's shack, flung the words over his shoulder.

The three outlaws had completely vanished by the time he was within striking distance of the isolated cabin. They had reached the foot of the bluffs and were lost to sight among the débris of centuries that choked their approaches. Norvice crawled stealthily round the shack. Everything was amazingly quiet. Except for the dull murmur of the falls the night was soundless. Then, as he crept nearer, another, more definite sound, invaded the si-

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lence—Sitka Charley's low voice mumbling steadily in the shack. Once it was punctuated by a suppressed burst of feminine laughter which was quickly stifled when the Indian's voice picked up the slow thread of his narrative.

Norvice guessed that the Sitka was telling the true story of Endersley's gold strike, and he was sorely puzzled to know what had become of the dance-hall girl. Then he saw her—a motionless figure in clothes which merged in color with that of the cabin's log wall.

Hers was a clever dodge. She was stooping between the water butt and some piled up firewood logs. So closely was she pressing to the wall and so low was she crouching in this narrow space that Norvice had to look again to make sure of her. He stood still and watched her. After a minute she slowly clambered onto the water butt, pressing her ear against the joint of the curtained window just above the water butt. Norvice crawled forward, as silent as a shadow.

There came a soft, scuffing sound, a sharp intake of breath and Norvice was

creeping away from the shack again. He walked slowly, clumsily. He couldn't well do otherwise, for in his arms he carried the straining body of Nell, one hand clamped over her mouth as mercilessly as a metal gag.

A couple of hundred yards from the shack he set her down. His hand slipped from her mouth and held her wrist like a steel bracelet. She winced with the pain, but glared her defiance at him. He pulled her close to him with a rough jerk, and stared angrily into her face. "What's your game?" he growled.

The girl was silent and he shook her. "Well?" And his eyes were as cold and callous as his voice.

"Oh, please! you're hurting my wrist!"

"I'd like to be hurting your neck! Cedar Falls and the locality around would be well rid of you. Now see here! I've got no call against you as a dance-hall girl; that's your own lookout. If you choose to get your living that way it's no business of mine, but when you start joining forces with claim-jumpers, thieves and bullies, well, I guess it's time to move."

He flung her away from him, viciously. "Go back to Dawson, back to Forty Mile," he ordered. "Back to the dance-halls and stay there. As sure as I find you hanging around Cedar Falls again I'll run you in. You're even double-crossing your own gang."

Norvice's grip on the girl's wrist had chafed the skin till the blood trickled, and he stood in front of her as though he would like to do the same to her throat.

She stood a little way from him holding a handkerchief to her lacerated wrist, looking him full in the eyes, without resentment, without shame.

"I—I'm not going back to the dance-halls," she said. Her voice trembled.

Norvice's eyes flickered. "Don't try to pull that stuff on me," he said acidly.

Tears started to the girl's eyes and she looked away. "It's—it's not fair; it doesn't give a girl a chance when even the Mounted try to drive her back to the halls," she muttered. "That—that ain't the Mounted's job—driving a girl back to—that."

"Me!" Norvice flared up in exasperation. "Me drive you to it? I'm doing my darndest to drive you out of Cedar Falls. You're a pioneer on your game in this camp and I'm not standing for it. Me drive you to crime and you running in double harness with the Magain gang? What in thunder are you doing in that company? What are you doing listening at the window of June Royal's shack?"

The girl looked at him through eyes that were dim with the tears of misery. "I—I wanted to see Miss Royal," she stammered.

"Yeh! That's why you came trailing in behind the Magain bunch. That's why I collared you standing by the water butt makin' less noise than a chicken in an unlaid egg. You'll clear out of Cedar Falls tonight, understand? The gang has gone north. You'll go south, east or west—I don't give a tinker's cuss which. But if you cross my trail again, I'll put you where you won't be able to make trouble for seven years. Get that? Miss Royal and Daddy Bonard have worked like maniacs to pull that man through, to do the right thing by everybody concerned, and do you think I'm going to let you upset the whole shooting match?" He wheeled the girl round and pushed her away. "Dawson lies away along there," he said. "Walk—and keep on walking!"

He watched her forlorn figure stumble away down the trail. For some minutes

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he stared after her, then he wheeled and flung his cigar savagely into the bracken. "Ain't it just plain hell—when they're pretty!" he growled, and instead of entering June Royal's cabin, walked slowly back to the Post.

Through the cedars he could make out the windows of his office, and mentally he wondered why Henderson had turned the lamp out. Certainly, there was no murky light streaming out through the panes. Getting closer, he saw that one of the lower panes was broken from the inside.

Hurrying forward, he pushed open the door and went in. Inside, the silence was profound.

"Where are you, Josh; anything wrong?" he called softly. There was no answer. He drew a match sharply across the sole of his boot and held it over his head. It fizzed and caught, its bright yellow flame lighting up the ramshackle office. Josh Henderson was lying on his face, with his head in a pool of his own blood, an ugly looking gash behind his temple. The chair and the rough-cut table had been knocked flying and the lamp was smashed. Flung in a corner, smashed and broken and empty, was the strongbox that only half an hour before had held Endersley's thirteen fat lumps of nugget gold.

The match flared up and shone full on the three repulsive faces leering out of the photograph on the wall. The jibe in their eyes seemed to be directed personally at him, and there was something of a challenge lurking in the depths of their contempt. Then the match went out.

Norvice improvised a lamp by pouring some paraffin into an open tin and put a match to it. The oil burned with an exaggerated flicker that precipitated a constant and rapid succession of lights and shadows in the disordered office.

In that intermittent light Norvice pulled his gun and with cold deliberation put three bullets nito the picture on the wall. Then he turned his attention to the man on the floor. Josh was completely knocked out; there was a gash in his head that would take weeks to heal and would always leave its mark. Norvice propped him up against the overturned table, stanched the bleeding, and bound up the wound. It was some minutes before Josh came to, but finally he opened his eyes and looked blankly for a moment at the Mounted man.

"Feel better?" asked Norvice. "Got a nasty crack on the head."

Henderson blinked. "For the love of Mike keep that light steady," he growled. "My head's ringin' like a bell!"

"Shouldn't be surprised," returned Norvice. "It looks as though you got a wallop from a pistol butt. Who did it?"

"Coldwater Griff. He——"

"Wh-at?" Norvice looked grim.

"Yeh! I was standing with my back to the door, stoopin' over the table a-telling those gold nuggets what I'd do to 'em if they was mine. You hadn't been gone five minutes. I heard a hissin' behind me, and when I heaved round there was Coldwater Griff glarin' at me less'n a yard away. I'd left my gun at the Come Inside, like the fool I am, and before I could holler, he hit me with the grip of his gun. I——"

"Yes, yes, which way did he go?" Norvice's nerves were on edge.

Henderson regarded him with a look of sour pity. "I didn't stop to notice, just then," he said.

"And you're sure it was Coldwater Griff?"

"If there's a lump on my head, yes!"

Norvice looked down at him with a worried frown on his face. "Damn funny," he said.

"Yes, like hell it is. I could laugh my head off." He looked up at Norvice. "Half an hour ago you said that somebody was going to be unlucky about those thirteen nuggets, didn't you?" he said.

"I did," answered Norvice, screwing his head round sullenly at the defaced picture.

"Well, I'm him!" said Henderson, tenderly rubbing his head. "And I'll trouble you to give me a helping hand down to my place. I—I want some brandy."

Norvice thought hard for a minute. From the fact that Griff was still hanging around it was to be argued that the others couldn't be very far away, and it also was to be argued that they mistrusted the yarn they had overheard the Indian telling. That, probably, was why they had left the girl, Nell, behind to play eavesdropper. The chances were a hundred to one that she had already got into communication with them. What a fool he'd been to take it for granted that they'd gone! She might have told them the true location of Ender-

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sley's strike. The least she could have done was to tell them that Sitka Charley had bluffed them the first time.

He tapped the injured man on the shoulder. "You lie there for a bit, old-timer," he said. "I've got to run up and see Endersley in a hurry. I'll send a couple of the boys along to give you a hand, but in case Coldwater should happen to pay you a return visit, I'll leave you my gun." He laid his big Colt automatic close handy to Henderson's right hand.

"Plug him between the eyes," he advised, "and give him the whole clip if you're in doubt about hitting him. In any case, I won't be more than ten minutes. I've got an uncomfortable hunch that the whole gang may be waiting for Cedar Falls to go to sleep, to make a raid on the Endersley end. That girl knows where the gold strike is, and it looks as though it is going to develop into a race to the claim —with Endersley still unable to travel. It doesn't look any too cheerful, does it?"

And Henderson agreed.

Norvice went over to the door to open it. "G'night, Josh," he said, as he pulled at the door.

But the door wouldn't open, though he strained at it with his shoulder. Something unusually heavy seemed to be barring it. It was one of those heavily built split-log doors with swinging bars that fitted into sockets, both inside and out.

He stood back and flung himself at it with all his strength, but the door didn't budge an inch.

"What's up now?" demanded Henderson testily.

"The outside bar has swung; the door's wedged. And here's a time when I'm sorry our windows are barred. It looks as though we shall have to make a row to be heard. The——"

Norvice continued talking, though he hadn't the haziest notion of what he was saying. His brain was working at lightning speed. Out of the corner of his eye he had caught a scarcely perceptible movement at the broken window. He flattened himself against the wall and cursed himself for a fool. He made frantic gestures to the man on the floor to throw him his gun, but Henderson was out of sight of the window and couldn't see anything of what was happening.

Slowly and without a sound a bronzed hand came in at the window. Gripped in its knotted fingers was a heavy automatic. For the flash of a second, Norvice saw the eye behind it, cold, forbidding, peering in through the broken glass—the eye of Coldwater Griff.

Norvice stood motionless against the wall. Henderson stared at him fatuously, while the hand at the window came to rest on one of the iron bars and took deliberate aim at something inside the room.

There came a brilliant flash and a most appalling crash from just behind and above Henderson's ear. The tin of oil erupted. It jumped an inch, and two round holes appeared in it in a direct line with the hole in the window. The paraffin drained out in a second and spread in a blazing stream across the floor.

"What the——?" Henderson's astonished exclamation fizzled out as he made a wild wriggle to avoid the flaming oil which expanded in an ever widening pool across the dry flooring. Norvice jumped in and kicked the wooden furniture clear, but one leg of the table was already burning, and the floor planks crackled ominously. He

pulled off his tunic and used it as a flail to flog out the flames, but the paraffin was too volatile and in a few seconds his coat was burning, too.

He grabbed his gun and leaped over to the window, but Coldwater Griff had gone. Norvice could hear the faint sound of his running feet as he raced away toward the safe cover of the bluffs.

Henderson staggered up to his feet, awake temporarily to the fect that there are worse things than sore heads.

"Quick," said Norvice, "give me a hand to move this desk. This place will be an inferno in a couple of minutes."

A big clumsily built desk stood in a corner against the wall and between them they pulled and tugged at it till it was clear. In the floor where it had stood was a large stone block, square and hinged. At the outer edges a steel ring was fixed in a swivel socket.

Norvice took a stance that straddled the stone. He seized the steel grip and heaved till the veins stood out like cords about his forehead. Henderson smashed off a table leg and used it as a lever. By the time they got the slab up, the walls were burning and the air was like a back-draught off a blast furnace. The smoke in the room was

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yellow as fog and a hundred times more acrid.

From the slab, a half-dozen ill-fashioned earth steps led downward. Norvice pushed the saloonkeeper down and then jumped in after him, pulling the great slab down behind him. After the blazing heat of the office above, the air down below struck freezingly cold and smelled of cold earth.

Henderson mopped his forehead in the darkness. "Phew!" he said. "Shouldn't be surprised if this isn't our home address for the next hour or so. Very thoughtful little place to have about the house."

Norvice sat on the earth step and gasped. His eyes were streaming. "Strike a match will you?" he panted. "There's a candle in a bottle over there somewhere."

There came a rough scrape and a spurt of flame. Henderson peered around and found and lit the candle. There were others on a ledge and he began lighting a couple more, but Norvice's irritable voice stopped him.

"One's enough," he said. "There's no air outlet down here, and we may be cooped up here for hours. If the boys start trying to put the fire out with buckets, they'll prolong the agony. The air down here will get too hot to breathe. And nobody up there knows about this hole."

The saloonkeeper inspected his sanctuary. It was a roughly dug cellar about fifteen feet square by about eight deep. The steps leading down from the trap-door were so rude as to be almost a slipway. In one corner was a bench with some blankets on it and a small keg of water underneath. In the other corner was a big box full of official documents and police returns for the neighborhood. The ledge on which the candle burned was scooped out of the raw earth. With those exceptions the place was just a bare dugout.

"Looks like a morgue and smells worse." Josh Henderson delivered his judgment and sat down on the step next to Norvice. "How come you found it?" he demanded.

"Had it dug four seasons back. You never know your luck in this country. I've used it since for the local archives—among other things. That's 'em over there."

"Very thoughtful," remarked Henderson. Overhead they could hear the crackling roar of the resinous logs taking fire. Once there came a terrific crash and the roaring increased tenfold. "That's the roof fell in," he observed further.

Norvice looked at him through eyes red-rimmed with the smoke. "Josh," he said, "you're a tough old bird—but—but ain't this hell!"

"Comfortably warm—but I get your drift. You mean about Endersley?"

"Yes. You can bet that every man jack in Cedar Falls is gathered around up above. I'll bet that even old Pierre and the Sitka have come down to watch the Post go up in smoke. Maybe they're running a sweepstake on how long she'll burn. Do you get me?"

"Uhuh."

"It means that Endersley and June Royal will be helpless and unarmed in that isolated cabin—with every other soul in Cedar Falls down here at the fire. And there's the Magain gang round the corner waiting to jump in on 'em. This trick goes to Magain all right."

"There's one thing," observed Henderson placidly. "Miss June don't give a brass button for any of 'em."

"Maybe," retorted Norvice bitterly, "but there's only one argument holds any weight with Magain—and that appears as a slight bulge on the right hip. And I know for a fact that there ain't a gun in her shack."

IV

JUNE ROYAL looked at her watch and frowned. "Mr. Endersley, it's high time you went to sleep," she declared in a tone that brooked neither denial nor argument.

The man who had struck it rich feigned an accommodating touch of deafness. He lay on the bunk talking earnestly to Sitka Charley, who, stolid and impassive as ever, sat on a stool beside the stove talking over plans for getting up to their new strike.

"It was fortunate—and yet it was unfortunate—that you wrote no claim paper when you found gold," commented the Indian. "Had you done so, Magain would surely have taken it from you on the floor of the Come Inside. Had you given it to me, Magain might have taken it from me when he got me alone in his cabin up there among the falls."

"M'm—sure!" said Endersley.

"Yet it is unfortunate. For now we ourselves must make that journey again. We were far gone when we found that gold; so far gone that your fingers could not write down the words according to the demands of the law; so far gone that we did not even stop to drive our claim-stakes. In a little while will come the snow. Before the clouds begin to empty themselves upon the land we must be out on trail. Our

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way is a far way, and you will need much strength. As the trail whitens with the

coming of the snows, so shall we shake off those who would get in before us. We will head north, but with the falling of the snow we will turn to the westward, following the line of the great river till we stand in Alaska. The snow will blot out our trail, so shall we leave none for those who follow. Does this sound good to you?"

"M'm—sure. But there's one thing I'm worrying about a goodish deal——"

"Mr. Endersley, will you please go to sleep!"

"And that's about dogs. Now, I take it we shall want at least ten, a full team and a big outfit. There's the rub— I'm flat broke."

Sitka Charley scratched his head. "You're not broke," he said. "Nor-vis still has the specimens. They are more than enough for our needs. I will arrange those matters. I will get the gold from him, and I will buy dogs and grub and outfit."

The Indian ceased speaking. He did so because he couldn't help himself. June Royal was gently leading him toward the door. It was very unusual; he didn't quite know what to make of it. White squaws seemed to exercise powers over their menfolk to a degree unheard of in the lodges of his own people.

"Good night, Charley," she said, patting him on the shoulder. "You've been perfectly splendid. One day, when that wicked person on the bunk is too far away to hear what I say, I will tell you how much I love you for all you have done. But you really must go now. You can discuss all those details tomorrow. Come in and have breakfast here, if you like. But my patient must go to sleep. He has had an exhausting day. Considering his weak state, he has had far too much excitement to be good for him. Good night."

Sitka Charley paused at the door. "Shall I go?" he asked placidly of Endersley.

"M'm—sure!" said Endersley. "You go, Charley. G'night, old scout."

But Sitka Charley apparently had lost interest even in Endersley. He was gazing, with a long sight, down through the avenue of shacks and timber clumps to the Mounted Police Post where a light in the window bobbed and blinked like an erratic spark in the dusk. Then the fantastic flickering ceased. It steadied for one long second and grew slowly to a bright red light. A smoke ball puffed out above it and began to spread. A burly figure detached itself from the wall of the Post and raced for the bluffs. Sitka Charley began to run.

By the time he got to the scene the Post was a roaring mass of noisy flame that streamed up and sent on high a straight column of smoke. Men were running from all directions—hunters, miners, trappers, fur agents, voyageurs, Indians, pouring in from their cabins and houses.

Sitka Charley walked round the burning Post. The glass windows shivered to fragments in the heat and fell. Through the iron bars he could see into the room, a yellow furnace of glaring fire that hurt the eyes.

"Anybody in there?" A dozen people asked the question and a dozen dubious heads shook in answer.

"Shouldn't think so. Wouldn't stand a ghost of a chance if there was. Looks as though the sergeant will be buildin' hisself new quarters."

"Wonder where he is?"

"Heard tell he was trailin' a clue on the Magain crowd. He sent for a posse of troopers in a hurry from Dawson. Maybe they'll be along in time to start cuttin' timber for their new mansion."

Sitka Charley paused in front of the door. The swing bar was clamped into its sockets, tightly, on the outside. He noted it—the bar was always clamped on the outside when the men left the building. Then the roof crashed in. A golden shower of sparks and splinters went flying upward, swirling and scurrying on the heated air, and a sudden, abrupt mushroom of smoke spread out above the building on the uprush of air. The falling roof sent the door-wall tottering; it swayed, sagged and fell outward. The blazing logs rolled ponderously across the ground, but the door, burning fiercely, fell intact. Sitka Charley looked at it. The inside bar lay unclamped across it at an angle. Flat on the ground it lay, a slab of fire, marked across by the two red-hot bars of iron. The Indian noted that, too. Because his was a single-track mind, he recalled the fact of the outside bar being wedged, he remembered the barred window, the unusual-

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ness of the cumulation of incidents, and the hand in his coat pocket fingered his gun.

Then another question went flickering round the crowd. "Where's Henderson? Anybody seen Josh? A lightning census showed that the boss of the Come Inside was missing.

"He can't be far away," said Masterson emphatically. "He was over at his saloon less'n an hour back; left in a hurry to come over and see Norvice."

"Wanted to see Norvice, did he? Then probably it was somethin' to do with that Magain clue. Where's that Indian—maybe he can give us a line on this."

They found him. He was stooping down, critically examining one of the fallen wall logs. Gummed on its rounded surface was part of a picture, scorched and blackened. It was scarcely decipherable, but the fact that pinned his attention to that smoking beam was the appearance of three bullet holes, each one straight between the eyes of the likeness portrayed.

The crowd gathered round, and Masterson went down on his hands and knees, fanning away the eye-stinging smoke with his hat. After a moment he made out the faces, and leaped to his feet.

"Boys, quick, batterin' rams!" he yelled. "There's been somethin' queer doin' in there."

Sixty men can accomplish a great deal in a hurry. In two minutes axes were ringing on the night air. In four minutes half a dozen tall trees swayed down to earth and were being denuded of branches. In six minutes as many demolition gangs were smashing and pulverizing the fire into a flat and scattered mass of smoking woodwork. The rams bashed and thundered on the walls, the corner posts splintered and fell and the walls caved in. The fire wasn't exactly put out, it was demolished—hammered out. It spat and glowed desultorily in a thousand isolated spots over an area of a hundred yards square. Among the débris a trapper found a pistol, red-hot and with the bullets exploded in the magazine. Another item was passed over with a kick. It was a tin with a couple of round bullet holes in it near the bottom—and Sitka Charley picked it up.

Then somebody found a red-hot stone slab, a thousand times too hot to touch; his badly blistered hands taught him his own foolishness.

"How long have the Mounties kept private wine cellars," he growled, dancing round.

"Now, that's very curious," said Masterson, frowning down at it. "I've known Norvice long enough to know this place inside out, but darned if I knew it had two floors to it. Hey! Charley, did you know anything about this?"

But Charley did not answer. Charley was not there. If they had looked a little sooner they might have seen the Indian flying into the dusky avenue of cedars toward June Royal's shack as fast as his stumpy but surprisingly supple limbs would carry him.

V

WHEN June Royal looked round and found that Sitka Charley had gone at last, she breathed with relief. Endersley had been slowly working himself up to a dangerous pitch of excitement. His mind was a whirl of fragmentary facts and details, a riot of flashing remembrances and keen appreciations. He knew where his gold mine was; he knew the Magains were on his trail; he knew Sitka Charley was doing his utmost for him, and he knew what a tremendous debt of gratitude he owed to June Royal and Pierre Bonard.

"Where is Pierre Bonard?" he asked, tossing uneasily on the bunk.

"He went down to the mission. And Sitka Charley has gone, too. There's nothing now to worry about, just close your eyes and try to go to sleep."

"But I don't feel a bit like sleep, really I don't. I've been sleeping for the best part of a month, these blankets are hot as an oven, and my eyes ache too much for sleep."

"Yes, but please! Charley will be coming back tomorrow! You can talk to him then, but now you really must rest your brain."

"Where are you going to sleep?"

"Pierre has gone down to fix me up a shakedown at the mission. You'll be all right. I shall lock the door and I've arranged with Norvice to look in during the night. After tonight he's posting a special guard here from sunset till dawn. He wanted to do it tonight, but he isn't expecting his troopers till the morning. So he's doing it himself for tonight. But

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in any case, I absolutely refuse to leave here until you are asleep. So if you want to be horribly unkind and keep me up all night, just keep on staying awake."

"All right, I'll try, but you give me a wicked choice. There's nothing I'd like better to do than to talk to you all night. Open the door for a few minutes before you go, will you, please? I'm terribly hot."

June nodded. She was halfway to the door when the apparition came. The latch clicked and the door swung open. For a moment she thought she was going to collapse in a heap. Coldwater Griff, a gun dangling by the trigger guard from a boney forefinger, was leaning against the door-post.

She felt the blood surge madly to her face and her heart began to pound. She could hardly believe her senses. Coldwater Griff—why, she had watched him run from her shack, watched him go with the rest of the gang on their wild goose chase up to the Nahoni Mountains, had seen him make through to the bluffs and start climbing.

Yet there he stood, a leering, cynical smile playing round the corners of his thick lips. He dangled the gun, playfully, as though the fact of its being there, swinging on his finger, amused him vastly.

She turned her head, half-fearfully, toward the man on the bunk. Endersley, with his head buried among the pillows and half-turned to the wall, was still blissfully unconscious of the awful thing that had happened. Then she felt the blood drain from her face, for realization came that Griff, about whom so many evil tales had been told, was almost unmindful of the man on the bunk. His cold, fishy eyes were fixed on her. It was she, June Royal, the beast wanted; his eyes were devouring her.

He grinned at her and advanced into the room. Knowing his unassailable strength, he thrust his gun away and held out his great arms to her. June Royal backed into the cabin with fright.

"Damn nice welcome, ain't it?" he said, throatily. Under the hairy eyebrows his eyes began to smolder. "What are you putting on side for, eh?" He stumbled against the hot stove and cursed angrily.

Endersley half sat up with a jerk, his face a mask of blank astonishment. Until that moment he had been perfectly unconscious of the drama unfolding in the doorway. He tried to get his knees to function, so that he could sit up, but muscles that had been denied action for over a month flatly refused to obey his urgent commands.

To him Coldwater Griff was only a name. To the best of his knowledge Coldwater Griff was miles away with the rest of the gang, heading up to the mythical Three Captains.

June backed against the wall and stood there, horrified, her hands pressed against the wood logs.

Griff hiccoughed and spat in the fire. "Thought I was—hic—way up over the bluffs, didn't yeh?" he growled.

He sat on the edge of the table, swinging his leg while he calmly surveyed her. To him, a woman was just a chattel. Any woman who objected to such an assumption was putting on airs and needed putting in her place.

He took out his gun and dangled it on his finger again, the same gun that had knocked Josh Henderson senseless and fired the police Post.

"This little steel-eyed devil rules the roost," he announced. "Now, m'gal, you're coming longa me, and don't look like that, either. Laugh, sing, show me how—hic—how pleased you are. My other gal, Nell, she left me. Halfway up the bluffs we was, and then if she—hic—didn't turn and give me the slip.

"So I came back for her. Bully says, 'Griff,' he says, 'you go back an' git that proud-eyed gal that old Pop Bonard has tucked under his wing, instead of Nell!' So I guess you've got the pleasure of next—hic—dance with us. If you wanna get yer furs an' sleepin' bag, ye'd better hurry, 'cos I ain't over anxious to hang around here longer'n necessary."

The cool audacity of it stunned Endersley; his own helplessness paralyzed him. Coldwater Griff completely ignored him. Once, certainly, he turned and regarded him, but there was such a look of contempt in his eyes, that it was obvious Griff was thoroughly aware of the sick man's helplessness.

"Come on, get yourself ready," he roared. "Lively now, or I'll put a bullet into your white-faced baby there—maybe that'll help you!"

June Royal hadn't moved. The fearfulness of Griff's last threat almost hypno-

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tized her; she felt herself sliding helplessly into a world of horror and dread from which there was no escape.

With an effort she forced her eyes away from the hateful mesmerism of Griff's animal gaze. For hope, for pity, for sanctuary, she looked across at the man for whose life she had fought for a whole wearying month. What she saw there brought a tiny message of a still tinier hope.

Endersley, hot-eyed and white-lipped, was making frantic gestures to her, pointing to the wall above her head. In his right hand was poised a bowl of flowers, star-flowers that she herself had cut a few short hours before. The bowl was heavy and full of water and his gesture unmistakable. His left hand crawled out toward a second bowl of flowers.

The frail straw of hope held out by Endersley was a turning point. At least there were two of them. Endersley could not be expected to do much, but such as he was capable of doing he was ready and eager to do.

She nodded. A full bowl of flowers whizzed across the room. It landed squarely against Griff's dangling gun and sent it spinning into the corner; a shower of cold water and broken earthenware drenched the ruffian. Coincident with the smash of the bowl, June jumped and snatched the dog whip Endersley had pointed to. The second bowl, streaking across at the bully gave her the chance to get the whip uncoiled. It took him flat in the face. June heard the click of it as it smashed against his teeth, knocking him backward over the table.

With a scream of pain he swayed to his feet, mouthing a foul string of curses and profanity. And then began one of the most amazing fights ever seen in the fighting North. Coldwater Griff, fighting alternately to get at his gun, or at June Royal's throat, and June Royal fighting to keep him off with vicious stinging whip-play.

The whip was one of the usual type used by dog runners in the North. A short, stocky handle a little over a foot long and a thin tenuous lash that could tickle a leader's flanks from twelve feet away. The thong was leather, but the switchend was moose gut, ferociously penetrating. In that shack on the outskirts of Cedar Falls, June Royal taught Coldwater Griff that a dog whip in the hands of an expert musher, as she herself was, can be one of the most efficient weapons of offence and defense in the world. A dozen times the merciless whip cracked at lightning speed round his arms, neck, legs, shoulders and clutching hands. He yelled aloud in agony and began crawling on his hands and knees toward his gun in the corner.

Endersley had shot his bolt. The shock and the exertion of flinging the flower bowls had been too much. He lay on his back, nerves and limbs twitching spasmodically, listening in a welter of hope and dread to the pistol cracks of the whizzing whipthong.

The outlaw at last pulled his parka about him, tucked his head down and crawled along the floor as the only safe place, as the girl panted like a deer run to exhaustion. His gun was lying near the door and he was within a couple of yards of it. His hand went out toward it. The lash played on it once, twice, thrice, as quick as light, as quick as thought itself. Three spurts of blood splashed on the hand where the thong bit, but the hand went on. The outlaw had reached the point where he was goaded beyond endurance. All he wanted was to get at that gun. Endersley, seeing his intention, made one last effort to swing the tide of battle. Rising on his elbow he tried to roll out of the bunk to drag himself over to the gun. It was too much for him, and he collapsed into unconsciousness.

"Stop!" panted June to the bully. "Stop—or—I'll blind—you!"

Instinctively the ruffian paused.

"If you—move—another—inch—I'll get you—right-clean-in-the-eyes!"

"To hell with you!" Griff shut his eyes tight and crawled on. In spite of the lash he got within two inches of that gun. Then something happened to him, something sudden and unexpected. He encountered a brown, wiry fist, to which was attached the most bewilderingly aggressive Indian he had ever encountered.

Sitka Charley had whirled in through the door and pitched into him like a fury of the North. Hot on the heels of the first terrific blow he planted a brace of others. Coldwater Griff rolled over on the floor and stared at him as though unable to believe the evidence of his own senses.

Then he rose to his feet and all June

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Royal remembered of what happened was a most surprising flurry of arms and legs and snarling oaths cut short by flying fists. A hundred times Griff slammed over terrible looking smashes at the Sitka's head, and a hundred times they punched big eddies in the air. Griff had never tried to fight a more elusive individual in his life. Even his pet wallop, known and feared in a hundred whisky joints along the Yukon, failed to connect, no matter how often he tried it.

Charley worked round to the fallen gun and kicked it across the floor toward June. The outlaw backed against the wall, bleareyed and puffy with the rain of blows that had been showered upon him. The number of times he had struck at nothing more substantial than air had taken more vitality out of his biceps than if every one of his blows had landed on the Sitka's boney frame. And what was infinitely worse, his wind had gone to the dogs.

A raging recklessness blazed red in his eyes; his brute nature rebelled against the maddening absurdity of a huge man like him being beaten by a handful of skin and bone like Charley—first flogged by a chit of a girl and then beaten by a scrap of a man.

With a bellow of frenzy he came at the Sitka again. Charley stepped back and battered away at the bull head as he came on. Four times he crossed his right over on the outlaw's massive jaw and twice he landed full on the point, but his weight was insufficient to force the knockout.

Then Griff uttered a throaty bellow of relief and victory. June Royal screamed and made a jump at the gun on the floor, but she was too late. Through the open door rushed two more burly figures. A pistol butt thudded on the Sitka's skull and he went down; Bill Haines went straight for June Royal and sent her spinning.

Magain wheeled on the groping Griff. "Where in hell have you been?" he snarled. "Fired the police Post and damn near put our necks in a noose. Why didn't yeh grab the girl and tote her along? The whole blame population of Cedar Falls will be out after us before sunrise. Quick, Bill, grab that gal. Shove that bear fur in her face if she don't stop that squawkin'."

Griff gazed dumbly at his rescuers. In a minute they had tied the girl up hand and foot and wrapped her in the stifling folds of the bear fur. Haines and Magain between them carried her out. Coldwater Griff, shaking off the torpor that enveloped him, went halfway to the door. Then he stopped, and, with a glare of vindictive hate in his sullen eyes, he returned and picked up the dog whip. On the way out he stopped long enough to take two running kicks at the Indian on the floor.

Outside, he heard Bully Magain's imperative voice calling, "Come on, you damned fool. Do you want to see the inside of the pen tonight! Norvice will be out after us in about two shakes. Bill and me was howlin' madmen ever to come down lookin' for you."

"Shut yeh face!" retorted Griff. He staggered along and overtook them. "Say, Bully, jest lay off. I've had all I want tonight from anybody! And lemme tell you, Norvice won't be out after us now or ever!"

Magain darted a swift look at him. "How come?" he jerked.

"He's having a holy argument by now up ag'in the Pearly Gates. I cooked him in the Post. Paraffin and policeman! Thought it 'ud go well together. Him and that barkeep at the Come Inside were in there together. So I fixed 'em both. The place was roarin' in thirty seconds. I got Endersley's specimen stuff, too."

Magain clicked his teeth and grinned. "Coldwater," he admitted, "I allow you haven't been pickin' flowers, after all. We shall have to lay doggo for the devil of a time up at the Falls unless we can make a clean getaway tonight. We'll have half of all the Mounted rampagin' out on our trail."

They hurried steadily on through the timber to the bluffs, chuckling over Griff's story of how he put an end to the promising career of Sergeant Ralph Norvice of the R. N. W. M. P.

All three of them would have been considerably interested to know that at that moment Ralph Norvice and Josh Henderson were lying on their backs under the wooden bench in the cellar of the police Post, their faces covered with their shirts soaked in water from the keg. The entombed couple lay listening with a gasping eagerness to the queer noises going on above them, the thudding and battering of the rams, the breaking of the beams and timbers, the scattering of the fire, while they slowly baked in a clay oven.

"Knew they'd enjoy themselves," gasped Josh. "Pity they haven't got a few firecrackers to let off, and make a real night of it."

They soaked and re-soaked their garments and wrapped them about their faces

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till the scorching air penetrated even through the wet wads. They scraped hollows in the damp earth and buried their faces in them for relief.

Henderson coughed and wheezed. "Whichever way you look at it, we are in a hole," he said. "We may get out and we may not. If we do, the odds are that you'll get fired for losing Government property and I shall find that the Magains have cleaned up my saloon for everything drinkable, smokable and smashable in it."

The dull roaring of the flames had slowly died away, and they listened for long, painful minutes to the prodigious thudding going on overhead. Then there came an unmistakable bump on the stone slab. Norvice got up. The heat of the upper air made him reel. He groped blindly across to the "archives," got a heavy book and began banging at the slab from underneath. When he collapsed, Henderson took over the job. On Norvice's fifth relay there came answering thumps and the sizzling of water poured on superheated stone. In a couple of minutes the slab was raised and flung back on its hinges. A group of excited faces peered at them over the edge.

"Sergeant," said Henderson in a voice that was like the squeaking of the hinge, "here's the gentlemen come to view the corpses."

When they got up, they deliberately rolled in the cold wet grass. Oblivious of the eager, excitedly questioning crowd, they lay and revelled in the delicious coldness, draining the heat from their scorched bodies.

Norvice finally sat up and grinned. "Phew!" he said. "Feel cooler now, old bird?" Then he slowly got up and gazed round at the ruins of the Post. "Sitka Charley around?" he asked.

"No; faded half an hour back. How'd it all happen? The Sitka found a milk tin with a coupla holes plugged in it and he went streakin' off like blue lightnin'. Say, was you penned in there from outside? Masterson said the outer doorbar was swung tight home—and old Keppel found this!" The speaker exhibited the blackened remains of the picture of Magain, Haines and Griff with the bullet holes through the eyes. "Belongs to you, don't it?" he asked.

"Give me that!" Norvice's voice crackled. He snatched the proclamation, folded it and put it in his wallet. "That little business concerns me alone," he said grimly.

"Well, how'd it all happen, anyway?"

"Ask Josh; he can tell you the whole story. I've got a job on."

He broke off and turned out of the crowd, as Pierre Bonard rushed up, agitated and out of breath. "Quickly, Sergeant, come quickly. June has gone!"

Together they hurried up the foot trail to June Royal's cabin.

Norvice went in and gazed around, an outburst of passion on his tongue.

The shack was in a hopeless state of disorder. There was blood on the walls and the floor. All the little ornaments and draperies were upside down. Endersley was in a deathlike collapse on the bunk and both June Royal and Sitka Charley were missing.

Norvice cursed volubly then turned to the missionary. "Pierre," he said, "you'll stay on here and get things fixed up for Endersley, won't you? I'll have to get word through to Dawson for a posse. That gang has made for the bluffs; maybe we can head them off with a file of troopers. Cedar Falls is going to be a hot spot for a day or two."

The missionary caught his arm. "You—you'll get Miss June back, Ralph?" The old man's eyes were troubled.

Norvice looked grim. "We shall have to," he said gruffly, and hurried out.

VI

FOR three hours the Magain gang marched onward, climbing steadily. They maintained a grim silence, except when one of them growled out a guttural order to June Royal, stumbling along between them. She was half-dazed with exhaustion and numb with the shock of the events of the last hour.

Bill Haines had taken the suffocating bear fur from around her head and ungagged her as soon as the risk of her cries being heard was over. But her arms were still tightly pinioned and the strain of trying to keep her balance on what was little more than a steep goat track was terrific. The only thing that kept her awake and moving was the ceaseless jab of Coldwater Griff's whipstock on her shoulders.

Higher up among the bluffs they were joined by the remainder of the gang, un-

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washed ruffians as full of fight and hate for the law as the leaders themselves. They were the scum and scourings of the gold camps, all with the word "Wanted" writ large after their names.

Below them a great stretch of the river country was spread out in the Northern twilight. Far down in the valley the lights of Cedar Falls were beginning to show. A thick haze of smoke hung over the charred square where the police Post had stood and little black figures could be discerned hurrying about or talking excitedly in detached groups.

A moving caterpillar along the river bank resolved itself into a shadowy file of R. N. W. M. P. troopers, cantering smoothly in from Dawson City. Bully Magain watched them for a minute with a sour grin on his face.

"Boys," he said, "they'll be in Cedar Falls inside ten minutes and then the show'll begin. They'll start something when they hear the news. Burnt their happy home, we have, and cooked one of their sergeants, pinched twelve thousand dollars in gold, kidnapped their local queen and put the boss of their only saloon out of action! Coldwater, they won't do a thing to you if they catch you!"

High on the broad plateau above the settlement they sat and watched the scene below with sarcastic glee. The leader of the troopers, a man magnificently mounted, scented trouble with a big T a quarter of a mile away. He gave an order, and the whole detachment came sweeping up the trail at full speed, wheeled round the outer timber clumps and pounded on into the village.

Coldwater Griff was stiff and sore with the hammering he had received in June Royal's cabin. He was nursing a jaw that had been nearly dislocated by the Sitka's flying fists, and his eyes and lips were painfully puffed. He was in a raging temper and he vented it on the girl. He jabbed her with the dog whip and pointed down at the troopers.

"Take a look at 'em," he said. "You won't see any help on your trail for a long time. And all you handed out to me down in that cabin is comin' back to you, with extras. By the time I'm done with you, you'll feel like a fresh broke Malamute at the end of its first hundred-mile run in harness."

June Royal returned him a stony silence. She lay back against the stump of a gale-driven pine tree and closed her eyes with weariness.

Further across on the plateau, out of sight of the settlement below, a group of camp-fires glinted in the trees, where the hirelings of the Skagway Syndicate waited to connect up with the gang in order that they might get a running start for the new gold field as soon as Magain had given them the location. Magain very much wanted to see their leader. This new situation that had arisen required a good deal of consideration. It was a long run through to the Nahoni country and he knew that runners would be out along every trail out of Cedar Falls before morning. The up-country trails would be dotted with sheriff's men and troopers, whose eagerness to shoot would only be matched by their uncharitable accuracy of aim.

He realized with a savage oath that he was in almost as bad a plight as Endersley himself. His one big trump card was that he knew where the Endersley gold mine was located—or he thought he did. By getting up to the location ahead of the law, he knew he could turn that knowledge into the best part of a million inside twenty-four hours; but the question was, could he get through before the law got out its network of outposts and troopers. The chances were, on a broad estimate, about sixty-five to one against.

The whole question turned on the amount of spot cash the Skagway agent happened to have in his possession. The Skagway people were sending up probably a score of men to stake claims on their behalf. For each claim netted by those runners Magain would demand a specified commission, and the syndicate had further announced their willingness to pay lump sums for each individual claim staked by the gang. Magain knew that the sums offered were but a twentieth of the real value of the holdings, but he also knew that the legitimate staking of ground claims did not absolve him or his men from arrest on an infinity of counts. The best his gang could hope to do was to stake claims, sell—and quit the country like lightning.

He decided that the idea of a live outlaw in the fastnesses of Cedar Bluffs appealed to his nature considerably more than did

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that of a millionaire swinging in the wind on the end of a rope at Nahoni Pass. He had the secret. If the syndicate wanted it, the syndicate would have to pay for it—and pay cash.

"Haines," he said, "go over and tell that smug-eyed city clerk I wanna see him in a hurry."

Haines grinned. "He'll like that, sure," he said. "He's been in a hurry himself for best part of a month."

Haines went lurching off and Magain sat on a great boulder on the crest of the bluffs and glared at the red-coats below, the long twilight of the summer months making objects in the valley very distinct. At that particular moment he was grandiloquently contemptuous of all those toy policemen panicking about down there. Ever since he first jumped the American boundary they had been doing that—and always too late.

But the next moment his contempt received a jolt, for down there in the valley, his unbelieving eyes saw something that gave Bully Magain the shock of his life.

All unconsciously his thoughts went flying nervously around a sentence that had long since burned itself into his brain—"The Mounted never come in without their man!" That slogan has been carted around the length and breadth of the North, and every law breaker has heard it to such good account that he believes in his own immunity only so long as the luck holds.

Bully Magain swallowed an uncomfortable lump and said, "Griff—how many nuggets did you say were in that haul?"

"Thirteen."

"I thought so!"

"Why, what's up?"

Magain scowled at him. "Nothin'," he snarled, "only I'd like to know why the hell you gave me that line of dope about Norvice. Think it's funny to stuff me up with a yarn about roastin' the life out of him?"

"Whaddya mean?" Griff snapped out angrily. In spite of his aches and pains and burning resentment, he was proudly conscious of having performed a good night's work on behalf of the gang. "Whaddya mean?" he demanded. "I notice you lay low till I'd done all the work. Norvice is done for, I tell you."

"That's a lie! He gave you the slip!"

Coldwater Griff's righteous indignation swelled. "That's right, Bully," he said. "It was all a dream. Maybe the Post is still standing. Maybe Norvice was weekending at the South Pole when my bullet nicked the tin; maybe these are only dream nuggets in a dream wallet; maybe that's only dream smoke down there in the valley!"

"I'm not questioning you fired the Post," retorted Magain. "I said, you lied about Norvice's cashing in."

Coldwater Griff snorted.

"All right," said Magain. "Just switch your lamps down there and take a look at who's waggin' his chin at them troopers in front of the Come Inside. And maybe that's Henderson's ghost unlockin' his own saloon?"

Coldwater Griff peered down incredulously into the valley, and his eyes opened wide. A look of blank and utter astonishment printed itself ludicrously upon his face, and a stream of profanity came from his lips—but he was convinced.

Bully Magain got slowly to his feet.

"C'm on," he said. "We gotta fade. Rustle that gal along. If she starts screechin', clump her over the head. Don't sit there starin', get a move on. All that tribe down there will be after us double quick. C'm on." He went off hurriedly and irritably toward the wood fires across the grassland.

Griff sat for a full minute, struggling with his sense of belief. He felt that fate had played him an unconscionably shabby trick. His temper edged down one degree nearer to complete rawness.

He took the moose thongs off June Royal's arms, prodded her with the whipstock, and growled, "Step lively now, or I'll play a tune on you with this." He shook the whip in her face.

As they left the crest of the bluffs, a brown, shiny-haired head peered cautiously up from behind a boulder a hundred yards down the slope and closely scrutinized the summit. Round its head was the plain white band of the Sitkas, the sign of chieftainship. Agile and silent as an eel, the apparition slid from cover to cover, mounting the precipitous slope with the effortlessness of a shadow. At the top it paused to reconnoiter before gliding soundlessly into the dark gloom of the spreading firs.

Haines and the agent met Magain half-

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way across the plateau. Magain was surly, the agent frigid. Without stopping, Magain said, "Something's slipped down there; wanna talk to you about it."

The agent fell into step at his side. "Go ahead," he said coldly. "What's the trouble now?"

"Mounted troopers just landed in from Dawson City, whole bunch of 'em. And —and there's other things, too."

"Yes?"

"Things have broken so I can't make the trip."

"Well?"

"I'll have to sell outright."

"Yes? I'll buy—if you've anything to sell, of course."

"I've got the location to a yard. I even know which way the crevasse points where they found the main outcrop."

"Um." The agent grew more icy than ever. He had been fencing with Magain for nearly a month. Expenses were piling up and he was still where he started.

"If you start in right away you can get in well ahead of the main stampede," Magain went on. "And you're safe enough. The posse can't touch you. You're one of those slick guys—always on the right side of the law."

"Um."

"I figure that my bunch will have to evaporate till things cool down. If I was on my own hook I'd chance that crowd down there, but not now. So I'll take spot cash for what I know."

The agent never took his hand from his near side coat pocket. In a voice that might have wafted off a polar ice-cap, he murmured, "Go on, Bully, I'm waiting for the bad news."

Magain gulped and tabled his cards. "I'll take half a million, in cash, for our share—now!"

"Ah! I guessed it was coming. Half a million, eh? No, you won't, Bully. Nor yet half a cent. I haven't a dollar with me. I'm working on bills, payable on demand at the company depots."

Magain scowled. "Am I talkin' to the agent or the blamed office boy?" he demanded.

"I represent my employers in the fullest capacity," said the agent. "I am, myself a metal chemist, and as such I can recognize gold when I see it. And, believe me, Magain, I shall need to see it very plainly before I sign bills payable to you. Show me the ground. I'll assess its value within forty-eight hours—and I sign checks to the full stipulated value. In the meantime, good night, Bully."

Magain stood speechless, while the agent sauntered across to his camp.

Then Haines tapped him on the shoulder. "Bully," he said with a throaty curse, "we seem to be rushin' about doing a hell of a lot of nothing. That city-shark has got us where we don't count."

Magain's eyes went red. "Bill," he said, "if you hand me any rough stuff, I'll choke the life out of you. I've had all I can stand for one night." He glared at his partner savagely.

Haines clicked his teeth. "Your nerves want feedin'," he said. He thrust his head up against Magain's ear. "Listen. We're handicapped by the rest of the bunch. Now, you, me and Griff could make it through to Nahoni on our own, dead easy. We could cart that agent along with us, strike across country, and land the whole stake—quick."

"You mean, quit the rest of the bunch?" the other asked dubiously.

"Sure. Norvice will have roped most of 'em in before morning. They're fools, anyway. Us three could clean up enough between us to clear out of here and go Outside. There's a joint I know down in Kansas City——"

The leader cut him short and called Griff. "Coldwater," he said, "how do you feel about having a shot at the whole works on our own; quit the gang and hit out for Nahoni?"

Coldwater Griff chuckled. "I guessed you'd think of one sometime," he said placidly.

They held a hurried council. Magain decided to make a quick getaway by canoe down the Little Cedar River to their cabin under the Falls, fit up with all the stores they could lay their hands on, and then get off for Nahoni Pass before dawn. They could cover their departure by posting the gang along the ridge of the bluffs as though they intended to make a fight for it.

The risks of trying to take the bluffs by assault were so great and so obvious that Norvice would probably hold his hand for a while. Whether he attacked or not, the leaders would gain sufficient time to get clear in the canoes cached at the river bank. The agent could be talked over and as for June Royal, if she still persisted in being sulky, they could give her a canoe ride over the Falls. That was up to her.

Magain called out the gang and posted them. All unsuspicious, they took up po-

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sitions behind the great yellow boulders at the top of the bluffs, blasphemously promising the Mounted a nickel-tipped reception.

"We can hold this place for weeks," declared Haines.

"Sure," said the gang, and settled down grimly to wait for things to happen in the valley below.

Griff marched the girl off toward the river. He was joined at the cache half an hour later by Magain, Haines and the agent. The agent only decided to come along after weighing the pros and cons to the last meticulous detail. He drove Magain frantic with anxiety to get away while the coast was clear.

Little Cedar River was at the height of its summer flood. Snow-fed streams and

freshets poured into it in little torrents from the highlands and mountain ranges behind. After the violent turmoil of its birth, it steadies down a bit where it emerges on the ten-mile strip at the top of the bluffs. Smoothly it sweeps across the raised plain, between high banks dotted with cedar, pine and fir. In some places where the rock protrudes and the banks converge, the river slides swift and deep under great canopies of green branches. Three miles lower down it leaps over the southern edge of the great plateau and falls sheer into the giant Yukon below.

"I'll take the gal," said Magain, untying the mooring rope of a canoe.

Griff coiled the dogwhip round his waist and his eyes met Magain's. "You'll take the counter jumper," he said. "The gal goes with me."

Magain looked at him and muttered under his breath, but when the party pushed off, Magain and the agent were in the lead, Haines was second in a single paddler and Griff, with June Royal in the bow of his canoe, followed along in the rear.

The canoes were tiny, frail little things, answering quickly to every touch of the paddle. June was wedged tightly in, bound and aching in every limb, but her mind only semi-conscious. She was but dimly aware of Griff's great bulk facing her and driving his paddle blade into the water with powerful strokes. The night was cold. A keen wind swept down-river from the snowcaps on the horizon, chilling her to the bone. Griff hugged the bank, bending now and then as the canoe shot by under outspread branches. The others soon were so far ahead that she could not see them. She was obsessed with a dreadful feeling of loneliness, of being carried swiftly and helplessly to the end of all things on the bosom of that black, silent river. She struggled to free herself; death in those icy waters would be preferable to living to face the dreadful life the outlaws would force upon her. She strained desperately at the cords, but the moosehide held fast.

The canoe swept on, nearer and nearer to the roar of the crashing falls. She knew that in a few minutes the canoe would be beached. They swept along under a tunnel of trees. Griff bent his head. Fifty yards further on the river curved round a bend, and straining at her bonds she could see their course. Black against the star spattered sky she saw a giant cedar standing sentinel at the bend, its branches sweeping over the water a very few feet from the surface. If only her hands were free!

And then, against the blackness of the cedar branch, she saw a yet deeper black, a shadow. She stared at it wonderingly, until the canoe slid underneath it. The gurgling *plish, plish,* of the paddle ceased a few yards before the tree was reached. The boat drifted under in a silence that was profound.

Equally silently the astounding thing happened. Griff was kneeling in the canoe peering ahead as the boat went under the outflung branch. Without even a rustle of sound, the shadow from the tree suddenly dropped. Iron fingers caught Coldwater Griff's throat like the grip of a bulldog's jaws. His eyes, goggling and horror filled, found themselves staring full into the pitiless face of Sitka Charley, upside down, hanging by his knees from the cedar branch.

In an eighth of a second he saw that, and then he saw no more. Sitka Charley's other hand came down with a fearful thud of a gun on his skull, and Coldwater Griff went limp.

The water swirled by as the canoe was jerked to a standstill. Slowly, with the Indian anchoring it to the branch by his

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grip on Griff's throat, it swung round in the current. The Sitka carefully stuffed his gun back into his belt, and then found himself in a quandary. He couldn't drop into the boat; his weight would have capsized it. June Royal was bound and unable to help him. So Charley released his hold. Griff collapsed in the boat and the canoe drifted from under the bough.

The Indian dropped like a plummet into the frigid water. A few strokes and he was alongside the boat, bushing it to the bank.

In something under ten minutes June Royal was stamping about on the grass trying to get her circulation back, a transference of thirteen nuggets had been satisfactorily effected, and Griff was savagely bound with the dogwhip. Then the Indian propped him up in the stern of the canoe and kicked him off into midstream, a dumb, silent messenger of warning to his friends who later rescued him.

June Royal looked at Charley a moment —then put her arms around the Indian's grizzled neck and kissed him full on the lips!

Charley received the gift of the gods with a flat calm in his heart. He scratched his head, and then, feeling in duty bound to make some observation on the matter, he whispered earnestly, "Bob Enders-lee—he dam fine feller. You nab him quick, miss. He like you, too—like hell, sure!"

VII

WHEN Bob Endersley was up and about again, he found that June Royal's company was still a very real necessity to him—and in quite a novel sense. Cedar Falls was living on the hair spring of hysterical expectation where he was concerned. Every miner and trapper in the vicinity had his stampeding kit ready packed and waiting to jump out on trail the moment Endersley moved. The whole settlement became a highly organized espionage system, shadowing his movements wherever he went.

But he soon found that whenever he was with June they left him alone. They knew that he wouldn't dream of asking June to make a long journey with him and they argued that whenever he went out with her it was perfectly safe to leave him alone and get in a little sleep while the chance offered.

Being a graceless young reprobate, he played his remedy for all it was worth, pleading for her company to give him relief from his sixty odd shadows.

She was with him on the day he rode up to Forty Mile on an outfit-buying expedition. Stores dot the muddy main street of Forty Mile, and furs and sleds and stoves and block-fuel, snowshoes, pack-tents, season-outfits, bales of grub and the whole gamut of Northern necessaries are spread about inside and outside the plank-built depots in odorous confusion. Here and there a bunch of dogs are penned, snarling and snuffling among themselves.

Bob had already bought several in Dawson itself, fine dogs all, broad in the chest, peak-nosed, lusty and thrusty. And here, cooped in a pen in a main street dealer's, he found his own leader, Sunnygold! Sunnygold, the dog he wouldn't eat and wouldn't kill when the frost devils were beginning to eat into his brain! Tawny yellow she was, keen, brighteyed and square underfoot. He knew her the moment he saw her.

He beckoned the dealer over. "How much do you want for that yellow one?" he asked.

"Hundred and forty—and worth every cent of it."

"No doubt of it," assured Endersley. "What do you call her?"

"Princess. I reared her myself from a couple of champs—last year's winners on the Yukon Race."

"Quite sure about that?"

"It'll snow in the winter," said the dealer.

Endersley leaned over on his horse and whispered to June. "Watch her when I call, June," he said. "Her name's Sunnygold."

The girl's eyes shone. She had heard the story of Sunnygold, heard it from Endersley himself and in her imagination she had come to love the splendid creature almost as much as did Endersley himself.

His eager voice cut in among the quarrelling noise of the dogs.

"Sunnygold! Sunnygold!"

The dealer gasped with astonishment at what happened. There was a rush and a flurry in the compound and a tawny body shot clean out of it, five foot sheer over the rails, landed in a hectic whirl of fur and paws and tail on the other side and went mad with delight round Endersley.

Endersley paid over the money. "What

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name did you say she had?" he asked.

"What you said, my boy. I muster been thinking about some other dog," said the dealer, unabashed.

THERE were days, too, when all Cedar Falls stayed indoors and played cards to while away the hours when bullets hummed among the shacks from the ridge-line of the bluffs. The outlaws, desperate at having been left in the lurch by their leaders, held on tenaciously to their ramparts. Whenever they detected signs of unusual activity among the Mounted below, they immediately opened up a fusillade.

"What are we going to do about those gangsters?" asked Endersley one day when the guns had been cracking away unusually heavily on the hillside. He, Norvice, June Royal and Charley were playing bridge with a disreputable pack of cards. A window had been broken that morning by a flying bullet and he was thanking his stars that June had not been there when it happened.

"Seen my troopers about lately?" asked Norvice.

"No, don't think I have."

"Well, that's what we are going to do about them. My boys have gone up-country. We're having the big round-up tonight. My bunch cuts across country to get behind them and take them on the flank. All the Cedar Falls boys are going to do a little cliff climbing from this side as soon as it's dark enough. Fixed all the main points this afternoon over at Henderson's place. The boys here are all set. Those hoodlums up there are booked for a lean time when Cedar Falls gets up to 'em. I've put you in the main bunch. That suits you, I s'pose?"

"Sure!" said Endersley. "There's a couple or three guys up there I want to meet."

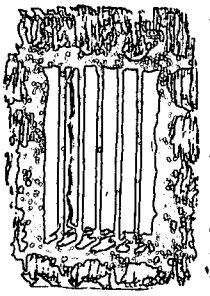
"I doubt if you will find them. From the way that crowd has been acting, I'd say they are a rabble. I believe their leaders have lit out."

"You don't seem very cheerful about it?"

"I'm not. If they've cleared out, they've cleared out for a mighty good reason. And that reason is probably Nell—you know that dance-hall girl that was around here. I packed her off out of Cedar Falls, but she hasn't been seen either in Forty Mile or Dawson. She knows where your gold mine is; and if she's connected up with that gang again, we've got the devil of a time ahead of us. That's why I'm making the big round-up tonight. We've got to find out how much that crowd knows."

Endersley frowned.

"We shall probably grab the whole shooting match tonight," continued Norvice. "But I don't care much if the three leaders have got away. I want to land that bunch with the goods on!" The Mounted Man gritted his teeth. "Those three are either going to swing or they are going to the pen for life!" he swore. June Royal looked across at him quickly. The hawk-like face had suddenly grown hard and merciless.



Sitka Charley calmly dropped a lighted squib into the conversation. "You want Nell? I seen Nell," he announced disinterestedly.

Norvice dropped his cards. "What?" he snapped.

"Saw her yes'day. She said she wanna see Miss June."

"Where was this?"

"Down river. She said you make her frighten."

"Frighten!" gasped Norvice. "That vixen wants shooting." He kicked his chair away. "Endersley," he said, "when can you be ready to start? I'm dead certain that she-cat is trying to connect up with Magain again. And if she does, you'll have to light out—fast."

Endersley rubbed his chin. "Can't start much before next week, Sergeant. Only got half an outfit together yet. And you know what my plans are."

"If that woman is still hanging around, you'll have to forget every plan you've made—and work out a new set tonight. Charley, come along with me!" The sergeant went out in a hurry, calling for his horse. The Sitka looked at Endersley with a question in his eyes. Endersley nodded and the Indian, perfectly satisfied, went out after Norvice.

The two of them being left alone in the shack, June wanted to talk, to dissuade Endersley from joining in the attempt at rounding up the outlaws, but she hardly liked broaching the subject. Endersley, too, wanted to talk, and he was not so delicate in the matter of coming to the point.

"June." The man had propped his chin on his fists and was looking full at her.

"Yes?"

"Would you—would you be very of-

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fended if I—if I asked you a very pointed question?"

She only laughed.

"I want to ask you what brought a perfectly wonderful and adorable girl like you out here to this unholy country?"

She looked at him in silence.

"You are from the South," he persisted. "All your tastes and likes and dislikes are born of the South. Won't you tell me?"

"You are not of the North, yourself."

"I know, but I am a man and this is a man's country. You are different; this is not your element."

She looked at him quizzically. "Men are terribly inquisitive creatures, aren't they?" she said. "They don't care much whether they rake up old family histories so long as they forage out some silly little point that has piqued their curiosity, do they?"

"I—I'm awfully sorry, June. I wouldn't have hurt your feelings for worlds. I——"

She waved her hand lightly and smiled. "Let me ask you a question." There was a wistful seriousness in her eyes. "Do you know your own people? I mean, did you have a mother, father, brothers, sisters, and all the glad, happy atmosphere in a home that only your own family can give? Did you?"

Endersley gazed dumbly at the girl.

"Yes," he said quietly. "My boyhood was as happy as I could wish. Today I know that I loved every hour of it."

"Well, I never did. I never knew my own people. Mother died when I was born. Dad, I understand, failed in business. The shock killed him. Out of the wreck of his affairs the lawyers built themselves a home of their own and rescued a little for me. My home life was an awful succession of boarding-schools and paid guardians. Not until my twenty-first birthday was I told anything about my own people. I had almost come to regard myself as a foundling, unwanted. Then for the first time I was told I was not all alone in the world. I had a brother. A strong, young, well set up young boy who, when the crash came, refused to be bossed by a long succession of schoolmasters. He went out—out. Oh, you can't think how I longed to find him, to speak to him, to be near someone of my own. The lawyers found out that he had last been heard of in Dawson City, years ago, in the days of the Stewart stampede." She stopped and looked at him with eyes that seemed to plead for understanding more than sympathy. She put her hand on his. "You—you do understand, don't you?" she begged. "You see, the feeling of loneliness and of wanting to find him was so big, and so wonderful, that——"

Endersley breathed deeply, and took her hands in his, quickly, earnestly. "Little girl," he said, "you shall find that young brother of yours though the Klondike freezes fifty foot thick. You shall find him if he is still to be found. I'll get Norvice to enlist headquarters; they know most pedigrees this side of the boundary. I'll sound all the big trading companies and the carriers. If necessary the gold mine can stay and rot."

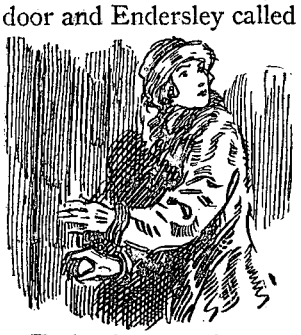
She smiled through eyes that were very near to tears. "I wouldn't dream of allowing you to be so foolish," she said. "Besides, he isn't young. He's nearly fifteen years older than I am."

A man in love will do a great deal for his girl—a great deal that he would not do even for himself. It is the only period of a man's life when he ceases to be a hundred per cent. selfish. And Endersley, the moment June Royal had gone, was seriously considering the proposition of throwing up his gold mine project, even though it was within his grasp, and concentrating his whole energies on finding June's last surviving relative.

"Gosh!" he muttered. "A brother she's never seen! Four years battling a lone trail in the frozen North to find a brother she's never seen. That girl is gold all through."

It is one of the odd coincidences of life that a goal that one mortal has been struggling to attain for four solid years may be attained by someone else in four single minutes. Four minutes after June Royal left the cabin, Robert Endersley was presented with the secret that June herself had spent four years in trying to run to earth. And it all happened as simply as that.

There came a soft, timid tap on the door and Endersley called out, "Come right in."



A girl came in, a stranger to Endersley, a wan, pale woman with a haggard face and frightened eyes. She closed the door carefully after her.

Endersley stood up and offered her a chair, but she shook her head. She

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came right over to him and looked him hard in the face, without fear, with just a touch of the old bravado in her poise.

"You're Endersley, aren't you?" she asked flatly.

"Yes. Robert Endersley."

"M'm! You seem a decent sort. They said you were. Sweet on Miss Royal, too, they say."

Endersley coughed. "Do they? Well—er—suppose we admit the fact?"

"Nell's my name. Just Nell. Go on, now kick me out. They've all been kicking me out, ever since I turned straight—the whole crowd of them, except Miss June."

"My poor girl, you can stay here as long as you——"

"Listen! I can't stay here. Norvice thinks I'm double-crossing you, but I ain't."

"Of course you're not. Now come and sit down for a little while. You look absolutely ill."

"Not ill, man; just hungry, that's all. But I've got to find Miss June." She broke off and stared at him again. "Maybe you could do it better than me," she muttered.

She caught him by the coat sleeve. "You gotta get that girl away out of here," she said earnestly. "D'ye hear that? Take her away; miles and miles away. Now, before she finds out."

"But, my dear girl, what on earth are you talking about?"

"D'ye know why she's come out here?" she demanded.

"Yes, to find her brother."

"That's right, and I say you gotta get her away."

"But—but—what——?"

"Look-a-here, I know who her brother is."

"Who?"

"It's Bully Magain."

Endersley gazed at the travel worn, weary little slip of humanity in front of him. He looked at her foolishly as though unable to grasp at the truth of what she had just said.

"Go on, say it!" she flared up. "Tell me I'm lying, tell me I'm mad. Go on, kick me out. That's the way they all do. It'd be a bit of a miracle to be treated any other way by a man!"

Endersley opened his mouth to speak, but the words failed to come. The dreadful possibilities of what he had heard left him dazed and speechless.

From a great distance he heard the dance-hall girl's voice continuing, earnest, pleading. She was right up close to him, staring hard into his face.

"Take her away," she was saying, "take her away if you want her happy. Better she should hunt for twenty years and never find him than find the animal I found.

"And it's the truth I'm giving you, mister. I ain't herded with that gang season after season without hearing all they got to tell. I know Bully Magain's story—and what it has to do with June Royal. Take her away, and keep her away. You can do it."

Endersley found himself staring at the girl like a man in a dream. He realized in a breath-gripping second that the outcast girl was too horribly earnest and too sure of herself for there to be any doubt of the genuineness of her knowledge. She had no delusions. Her devotion was sober and sound. She knew.

He pulled a chair to the table, and wiped his forehead.

"Sit down a little while and rest," he said jerkily. "I'll get you something to eat. After you've rested we must talk this——"

"I ain't going to rest and we ain't going to talk!" she flared back. "My orders is 'Fade' and they came straight from the Mounted. This is a job where you act. Talking won't help you none, and I got nothin' more to tell."

"Oh, but that's all wrong. Norvice won't bother you while I'm around, believe me."

The girl laughed, a hopeless, mirthless laugh.

"Oh, don't you worry about Nell," she said bitterly, and slipped back unconsciously into her old defiant manner. "Nell has looked after herself on a lot of rough trails. And besides, Norvice is all right; he's a bit rough, that's all. Can't look at things from a gal's point of view. All the Mounted are that way, but they mean right. Ralph reckons he's in right about me. But he ain't, see?"

She crept toward the door muttering, "Now, if I can slip away behind those elder bushes before he comes around, I'll be as good as safe."

She opened the door and peered out furtively, but Endersley pulled her back into the cabin and slammed the door.

"I'm not going to let you go like that," he said quietly.

"Is that so?"

"Yes, that is so. Things have so hap-

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pened here recently that my say-so counts for a whole lot in Cedar Falls. Norvice is a friend of mine. I can put him right about you in less than two minutes. He has got nothing against you except that he believes you are carrying information to the Magains. But I can fix that up for you all right."

"Yes, you won't!" Nell turned on him savagely. "Look here," she said, "you just let me have my little laugh on Norvice. Men have given me a pretty thin time of it ever since I can remember, and here's a chance to get the laugh on one of them—and I am going to take it."

Endersley sat on the table and scratched his head. This amazingly courageous girl left him more or less dumbfounded.

He wasn't to know that it was costing her every scrap of will-power in her tired little body to put up that magnificent bluff of a reckless bravado. Every morsel of her ached and longed to fall on that warm-blanketed bunk and sleep for hours and hours and hours.

"Well, look here," he said at last. "If you won't stay on and see it through, will you promise to keep a tight mouth about what you have just told me? If this matter gets to June's ears it would be the wickedest thing one woman ever did to another."

Nell looked at him with a withering pity. "D'ye think I risked crawling back here with that story so's I could go stampeding around afterward with my face behind a megaphone?" she asked. "I was going to pitch her the yarn that she'd find her brother way down in the cattle country. Had it all fixed."

She stopped and thrust her head forward in a tense attitude of listening. Endersley heard a soft 'damn' under her breath. A couple of moments passed and the cause of it became apparent. Footsteps were approaching the cabin, footsteps in which the clink of spurs merged with the flat clump of leather.

Nell looked round like a cornered rat. "This is your fault," she said. "If you hadn't pulled me back I'd have been halfway across the river by now."

The latch clicked and the door swung open. Norvice put one foot inside and then caught sight of the girl. He stopped dead, unbelief, amazement and anger in his eyes. He came slowly on into the room and stopped in front of her, a cold brutality in his attitude.

"So you think you can ignore a fair warning, do you?" he said, his voice cutting as a knife edge.

"No, Sergeant darling, I just *had* to come back and see your sweet face again," she answered, though her very soul was wilting within her.

Norvice grabbed her wrist. "Cut that out!" he snapped. "This is where you wish you'd lit out to the other side of the equator. That's the——"

"Just a moment, Norvice!" Endersley stepped forward and laid a hand on the policeman's shoulder. "Not too rough with that kid—she's had a tough time. Just let me explain."

Norvice wheeled on him. "Mr. Endersley," he said coldly, "I'll trouble you for leave to attend to my own business. This is an affair you know nothing at all about and I'll thank you not to interfere."

"This is my business. I don't care what you've got against that girl—it isn't anything compared to what she has just done for me. You've got her all wrong."

"She's kidded you the same as she's kidded the rest. This little devil is the cutest actress this side of hell. This is my show. I've had enough of her."

"But just listen a minute——"

"You just listen to me!" Norvice blazed. "I've just had news down from the boys on the bluffs that Magain and Co. haven't cleared out yet. The three of them are still up there in some secret cubby-hole of their own. They haven't shifted. Why? Is it because they know we've got every trail out of Cedar Falls covered? Is it because they don't know the way to Nahoni? Is it because they like the scenery up there, or because they're scared to move? No! it's because they're waiting for this woman! That Nahoni Pass story of Sitka Charley's hasn't gone across. Either they've smelt a rat or she's put them wise. She figures on crawling back up there with the whole lay-out. I keep telling you, Endersley, she's been double-crossing you ever since you first hit the floor of the Come Inside, and I'm through!"

"Well, I'm not!" Endersley spoke very deliberately. "That girl is doing her best to cut loose from the old game and run straight. And, Norvice, she's going to get that chance if I have to fight you right here in this cabin. And I'll still be standing when you're counting the logs in the

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roof. I mean it. But before you unbutton your coat, I'd like to point out a few facts. That girl has done no wrong. If she has, you've got no evidence. If you have, you've got no warrant. And in this cabin she has even more right than you; I've just offered her hospitality here for as long as she cares to stay—and that offer stands!"

Norvice set his teeth grimly. "That stuff's good drama but poor law!" he growled. "The Mounted goes as far as its gun will carry it." For a minute he looked from one to the other, mentally figuring his course of action. He rubbed his chin.

"No!" he muttered reflectively. "We won't fight about it, Endersley, but that girl ain't going to get away with it this time. Tonight is the big round-up of those hoodlums up on the bluffs. I've got plans out to corral the whole bunch and she knows it. And believe me—" his voice took on a vicious note—"she isn't going to move a leg outside this shack, not if—" he picked up a chair, took it outside the cabin door and sat down in it, laying his gun square across his knees—"not if I have to keep you both penned here till the show's over." Norvice cocked his gun and glared sullenly at them.

A flicker of a smile crinkled the corners of Endersley's mouth. He went over and leaned against the doorpost.

"And you're game to sit there for four hours doing that?" he asked.

"I'm doing it!" retorted Norvice, and twirled the gun.

Endersley filled his pipe and lit up. "You realize that we are acting like a couple of fool schoolkids?" he said.

"Sure!" responded Norvice grimly. "But that won't prevent my shooting."

Endersley saw the glitter in the bitter eyes and he knew that the Mounted man's finger would tighten the moment he attempted to test his warning.

"Tell you what," said Endersley, realizing the impossibility of the situation, "I'll send for June Royal. She will keep an eye on Nell till the job's through. We can't mess around here like a couple of lunatics with things getting hot up there on the bluffs."

Norvice nodded. "That'll do me," he said. "I'm just impressing on your soft skull that I don't trust that woman any farther than I can see her."

He went over to her and growled in her ear. "I'll have a trooper up there on the range, covering this cabin with a rifle. If you move outa this door you'll drop. If you

shin up outa the window and I find you, you'll drop. And if you——"

Nell broke in upon his venomous warnings. "And if you take my tip, young feller, you'll steer clear of that big boulder up alongside the falls. If you don't, you'll drop. And what's more, you won't hear the crack of the gun that drops you! And now hit out, Little Nell wants to go bye-bye."

Norvice turned to Endersley. "You hear that?" he said heatedly. "I tell you, she knows more about this business than you and me put together. She's been the runner between them and us all the time." He turned to her. "Hey, you! You know where Magain is now, don't you?" he demanded.

"Sure, dearie."

"I mean you know where his hideout is located, eh?"

"Yes."

"Well, where is it?"

"North of New York, and a lump west. Sorry, but that's all the information available at the bureau. I'm not double-crossing Bully any more than I'm double-crossing you. All I'm telling you is to keep away from that big boulder. I'd just hate to see that nice red tunic with a hole in it."

"See here, young woman, I——"

"See nowhere. Bully did me a good turn now and then and that's a darn sight more than you ever did. Now run away and do some work."

Norvice went outside with Endersley, his face a perfect study of chagrin and amazement.

"Do you believe me now?" he barked. "You watch—I'll get her yet!"

"You'll lose all your bets," murmured Endersley, and went down to find June Royal.

VIII

STARK and tremendous, the gaunt bulk of the bluffs towered up into the night. Here and there along the ridge a watch-fire winked and flickered where the last of the gang hung out. Over all, like the low note of a mighty organ played on a minor key, hung the trembling thunder of the ceaseless falls.

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Lights burned in the windows of the camp shacks. Lights they were, that told a deliberate lie to the desperate watchers on the ridge, for Cedar Falls was deserted.

One or two, those whose eyesight barred them from getting behind a gun, sat in the barroom of the Come Inside and shattered the silence of the night with choruses long since faded from popular favor in other latitudes. Every now and then a door slammed heavily. To all intents and purposes Cedar Falls was full and carrying on as usual.

But in every other respect the population of Cedar Falls had completely and silently disappeared. It was, as a matter of fact, slowly scaling the bluffs, creeping up yard by yard to where the watch-fires winked along the ridge.

Miners who, in the ordinary way, would have left the Mounted to manage its own job, readily joined in the round-up. They had been irritated by the flying bullets zipping down from the bluffs whenever they showed their heads. Much glass, too, had been broken in Cedar Falls since the gang first took to the range. Norvice had little difficulty in raising an assaulting party when he fixed his plans for the big round-up. Cedar Falls, individually and collectively, was eager.

The troopers, who had been making a five days' detour to get round behind the bluffs, were to attack at midnight, crossing over Little Cedar River under cover of darkness. On such an expedition, of course, orders could only be provisional; so, in the event of the assaulting party being surprised as they crawled up the bluffs, the troopers were to wade in right away, a fusillade of gunfire being counted as sufficient intimation that the fight was on.

Two hours from midnight found the faithful band of decoys in the Come Inside still putting up the bluff of their lives. The climbers, high up among the ridges, heard hot words, shouts and yells, leaping in passionate streams from the lighted bar of the Come Inside.

Nearer at hand, one by one, the watch-fires faded and died.

Silhouetted against the sky the attackers saw one of the desperadoes scattering his fire with his feet, stamping on the red-hot embers, before picking up his gun and his outfit and going back to the gang. They had been doing that for the best part of a fortnight.

The rabble up there were in desperate plight. Leaderless, slowly becoming foodless and with every avenue of escape ceaselessly watched, their only hope of winning through was to wait until the law began to climb up the bluffs for them and to annihilate it as it approached.

But it seemed as though that attack would never materialize. For yet another night they could coil up in their blankets under the trees and sleep soundly, giving no thought to the hours of darkness. They could rest peacefully, secure in the knowledge that Cedar Falls was sleeping, too.

Sitka Charley was the first one over the summit. Shadowlike he had vanished on ahead before the assaulting party had been climbing ten minutes. None of them had seen him or knew where he was by the time they breasted the ridge. All they knew was that they found the trussed-up body of a sentry, with half a pound of fur stuffed in his mouth, lying beside the burned out ashes of his fire.

In a tense and cautious silence they crawled on over the flat plateau. A quarter of a mile from the ridge they saw the gang's rendezvous. Cooking fires blazed and crackled in a long line between the rows of trees. Every now and then one of the bunch got up and replenished the fires, flinging on great armfuls of cut wood from stacks already chopped. The gang was sleeping there, great inanimate bundles of blankets, their heads on their rolled up fur coats and their feet outstretched to the fires. They slept with their boots on and their guns within a palm's breadth of their pillows—and they slept soundly.

The law, with sixty guns in its hand, crawled on down to the trees. There was a nerve wracking pause for a couple of minutes when one of the bunch, restive or suspicious, reared up on his elbow and peered around. It was at that moment that Endersley, at the end of the line, had begun to walk forward. He could not check his footstep. His boot came down with a soft crunch on a patch of withered

leaves. The suspicious one whipped round, staring over his shoulder in the direction of the sound. Endersley froze, and waited what seemed a century, the man's eyes apparently fixed full upon him.

And then, out of the corner of his eye, he saw another object that held him for

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a brief, thrilling second—a crouching figure that was crawling toward the outlaw with amazing silence. There was a gun in its hand and a bold white band round its forehead.

What followed, happened in a desperately short span of seconds. The outlaw blinked twice and stared at Endersley with growing consciousness as his senses fully awakened. Then his face suddenly twitched and a startled look of understanding shot into his eyes. Slowly and with sinister deliberation his right hand began to move over his left shoulder toward his gun. The two of them stared each other eye to eye, while the Indian was crawling on inexorably and silently.

The outlaw's gun was lying on the grass beside his head. Without taking his eyes off Endersley's staring face, he groped about on the ground for it. The Indian got to within a yard of the outlaw's head and his arm went quietly out toward the gun. The outlaw's hand nearly collided with the Indian's as the thin brown fingers grasped it. Tiny as the noise was, the man heard it, the rustle of grass in his ear.

He jerked round bodily and found himself staring point blank up the muzzles of two guns, his own and Sitka Charley's. They were pointing, without a flicker, dead into his eyeballs.

Sitka Charley bent over the outlaw's one ear and stuck a gun in the other. "You move, I shoot. You speak, I shoot," he whispered.

The remainder of that round-up came as near to touching the fringe of the ridiculous as anything also touching life and death well could. The hollow basin of the rendezvous was suddenly alive with crawling figures—figures that crawled with their fingers on the triggers of their guns.

Endersley turned to the next recumbent figure. He was a dark, heavily bearded man who breathed stertorously through his lips. There was a gun at his head and another tucked into his blankets. While Endersley was taking possession of them the sleeper let out a terrific snore, muttered fretfully in his sleep and clicked his teeth together. Endersley opened the automatics, emptied the magazines, and replaced the guns in their original positions.

So it was going on down the whole sleeping line. Josh Henderson rounded up five guns himself, unloaded them and put them back. It was comedy pure and simple, but verging very close to tragedy. Norvice didn't like it a bit—he had a report to make out when the job was through—but the miners were doing the job in their own way.

Norvice whispered to Endersley, Endersley whispered to the Sitka and the Sitka slid away into the opposite fringe of trees to get the troopers.

Within five minutes every bullet had been extracted and the weapons restored. Like black spectres the miners crawled back to cover, leaving Norvice standing, a solitary figure in the red glare of the firelight.

They played their comedy through. Suddenly, from the gloom beyond the fireline there came the most appalling howl that ever startled the Northern night. It sounded like ten thousand agonized coyotes.

Its effect was electrical. The outlaw camp erupted. Endersley, behind the woodpile, had a hazy impression of thirty mounds of blankets suddenly ballooning and bursting in the air, of maddened, panicky bodies hurtling out of them, of brawny arms grabbing madly at useless guns; of a ludicrous tattoo of clicking triggers; of a whole line of amazed and incredulous desperadoes, helplessly gazing at a forbidding figure in red, from each hand of which blue steel glinted in the firelight. He stood with legs apart and jaws tight, swaying slowly as he covered the gang.

The desperadoes cut a sorry figure, in their hastily roused condition. Only the blazing fury in their eyes showed how the ease of their capture flamed bitterly in their souls. For a long, uncomprehending minute they fully believed they had been outwitted by one man, the upstanding, leather-faced devil in the red tunic.

"Stand up!"

Those who weren't already on their feet sullenly rose, their eyes fixed on the man of the Mounted in a glare of animal hate. The more reckless of them began edging in toward each other. They turned their heads to reconnoitre the chances of a quick dash down the bluffs—and they gasped.

They saw that they were ringed around by a circle of grim faces, lit up by the firelight. Cedar Falls appeared to have come up *en bloc*. It was all as amazing and incomprehensible as that other disgraceful bit of sorcery—their empty guns.

The miners were mocking, sarcastic, derisive and prophetic by turns.

"Thar'll be a fine run on pine trees and ropes in a coupla days," declared Josh Henderson hopefully.

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Norvice motioned the troopers out of the trees. Deftly they searched the whole bunch and piled their barren armory in a heap. Then the sergeant marshalled the prisoners into single file and started them off down the bluffs.

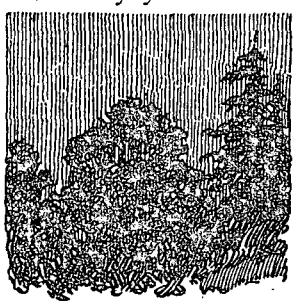
"Take 'em away!" he said to the troopers. "Put 'em in the cellar for the night, and mount a guard till I come down. I'll get 'em up to Dawson in the morning. Two of you will come back when you've settled 'em, and pick up my trail at Little Cedar River. I'm going to have a shot at Magain, Haines and Coldwater Griff. You'll probably pick me up somewhere down by the falls. Any of you other boys care to come along, we ought to make a hundred per cent. job of it."

IX

NORVICE, Endersley and Sitka Charley, together with a good dozen of the Cedar Falls citizens, set out at a quick stride for Little Cedar River, while the remainder added themselves as escorts to the prisoners going back down the bluffs.

"It's like this," said Norvice, when they got to the falls, "the leaders of that bunch have got a hideout somewhere around here where they can keep an eye on things. We'd better scatter, and scout separately. One shot from any of you will bring the whole crowd."

All through the night they searched the plateau country, beating and quartering over every yard of it until daylight, but hunt as they would, trail as they could, there was neither sight nor sound of the vanished outlaws.



"My boys can't have been sending down wrong information," Norvice said testily. "They've actually seen Haines hanging around here. And then Nell—she said she knows where their place is."

Endersley said, "Yes, and I'm unconditionally hungry. And Cedar Falls is a disgracefully long way——"

He broke off abruptly. A feminine voice had broken in hurriedly upon his declamation. He looked round in surprise, his eyes scanning the boulders and bushes in the vicinity.

"Sergeant, if you want to live, don't move!" The words rushed out in a tempestuous stream. "You two fools! I told you about that boulder! Don't stand there, Norvice, or you're mutton!"

Endersley made a crouching jump at Norvice's gun hand. "Don't make a fool of yourself!" he said angrily. The sergeant was glaring at a boulder a few yards away and pulling out his gun.

Behind the boulder, flat down, they saw the head and shoulders of Nell, eyes fixed on Norvice in a look of desperate warning. And Endersley, in his clearing understanding, saw more than mere warning in her brown eyes.

"Shooting me won't do you any good," she went on quickly. "What did you want to go and start muckin' about round *that* rock—for? Wasn't there hundreds of others you could have chose?"

Norvice looked around him and noted for the first time that he had been sitting under the very boulder Nell had warned him against. In some little mortification he glared at the girl, a string of savage questions on his tongue. He made a movement as though to rise and seize her, but Endersley interfered. He grabbed him, seizing his gun hand. "Just get the heat out of your head," he growled. "I'll give this rock a chance to prove Nell out."

Norvice, white-faced, looked good for murder, but put up his automatic.

Endersley took his hat, stuck it on a dead branch, and slowly pushed it a few inches above the top of the boulder. Something hit the branch-top with a soft *whuck!* and when he lowered it again there were two neat holes drilled in the crown.

That was all. Not a sound, except the momentary passing whine of the bullet and that *whuck*. Only that—and two holes in his hat.

He tried again, from the side, and again with the impact of the bullets there were four holes in the hat crown.

Norvice looked at the girl oddly. He pursed his lips and stared away down into the wide valley. "Right, Nell," he said quietly. "That evens up a whole lot!"

"Don't!" she gasped. "You don't know how much better you look with your nose in the air."

Norvice was silent for a few seconds, and then began snapping a shower of questions at her.

"At it again!" she complained. "All the world must be one great question mark to you, bo. Now listen. I'll tell you all I know without you askin' questions. Miss Royal hasn't let you down—she's up here

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somewhere lookin' for you with me. Haines was seen in the village last night. Sure! Think I couldn't recognize his ugly mug a mile off? He'd come down after me. June spotted him and we cleared out to put you wise. He must have seen Cedar Falls empty itself up the bluffs. The boys got the gang down all right, and into that mud cellar. Everything is quiet, but the best thing you can do is to slide away from there as fast as your hands and knees can carry you. Those bullets can keep it up, intermittent like, all day!"

Endersley half-rose, but sat back with a jerk. A shout that rose to his lips was choked back with a violent effort.

Two figures, each unaware of the other's presence, had emerged, almost simultaneously, from the trees.

Norvice gasped. Both he and Endersley saw the tragedy of it in the same helpless flicker of time.

The one to the left was June Royal. She was waving to them as she caught sight of them under the boulder, and, all unconsciously, was running into the direct line of the silent bullets. The shock and horror of it held them speechless.

Then another figure appeared further round the angle of the stone, nonchalantly swinging his gun in his hand. It was Bill Haines, wholly unaware of anyone's presence save his own.

As June Royal came so unsuspiciously right into the flight-line of the silent bullets, it happened that her shoe lace came untied and trailed round her ankle. With a little gesture of annoyance she slipped down on one knee to fasten it. A fraction of a second after her head went down out of range, Endersley heard the whine of a death bullet drone by overhead.

Haines, approaching the rock from the opposite angle, passed from the vision of the two crouching men.

As he did so, he and June Royal caught sight of each other. The outlaw stopped in his stride for one pulsing second and stared at her. Then his ugly lips thickened into a venomous grin as he clicked back the safety-catch of his gun.

June, on one knee, looked up at him with hunted, desperate eyes. She hadn't time to think; she saw the expression in Haines's eyes which told her of an evil death. With a single snap-fire movement of her right arm, June Royal whipped out her gun and fired.

It all happened in a flicker of an eyelid. It didn't seem possible for her to have had time to aim, yet Haines toppled. He threw up his hands, his gun flying high over his head in a wide shining arc. One hand clutched madly up at his head as he fell, a sprawled-out figure between the girl and the boulder.

For a moment she looked dully at the body. Then she covered her face with her hands, the gun falling with a clatter unheeded to her side.

Endersley began crawling toward her on all fours, away from the boulder of death. "It's all right, little girl," he called softly. "He asked for all he got."

But even while he spoke the words, he knew they could be but cold comfort to a girl, stricken with horror at having taken a human life!

He reached the body and looked at it. Haines was not a prepossessing individual even in life. There was a blanket roll strapped to his back and Endersley unlashed it to cover the huddled figure. As he was pulling it up over the head he stopped and stared. Then he wheeled round to the girl.

"June! June!" he said. "Haines was never dropped by any bullet of yours! Look! He was facing you when you fired. You couldn't have done this. Haines got his right behind the ear. The gang blundered; they dropped their own man."

June looked up with quick relief in her eyes. Endersley felt proud of her at that moment, for he knew that, in spite of the sincerity of her relief, she would have risen to a courage sufficient to draw and shoot again were the need as dire.

He was at her side with his arm round her shoulders, whispering assurances when Norvice suddenly interrupted them with a shout.

"Gosh, Endersley, I've tumbled to their game!" he yelled. "We must be either blind or crazy not to have hit it before."

He crawled out to the right-hand edge of the boulder. Shading his eyes with his hat, he stared out across the tumbling chaos of waters thundering into the Yukon. Then with his gun out-thrust through the grasses, flat on his face, he began pumping round after round into the very face of the falls. Clip after clip he blazed at the sheeting downpour, while Endersley turned and stared at him in amazement.

"What—what's biting you?" he yelled back, and then went flat on his face again as another bullet whanged murderously past his ear without his hearing sound of a shot. The Mounted man turned and regarded him with a cheerful grin. "Come

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over here," he said. "Come and take a look for yourself."

Endersley crawled back to the boulder, craned his neck round the lower left hand angle of the granite mass, and peered cautiously across at the falls.

"See there? Near the middle," he heard the sergeant's directing voice. "See where

that lump of rock on the crest of the falls splits the stream?"

"Yes, I've got you."

"Well, that's where those damned quiet bullets are coming from. Reckon there must be a ledge or a shelf back there behind the falls. The water comes over in a curve making an air space of, maybe, ten or a dozen feet between the wall and the water. Those hoodlums have got some sort of a shelter on that ledge, and they can shoot out through that gap in the falls. They command everything in a line with that gap, and the roar of the falls drowns the crack of their guns. Get me?"

"Yes, I get you. But how the devil do they get down there?"

"Humph! If the answer to that one was as simple as askin' it, they wouldn't be in there."

The shooting had brought the whole Cedar Falls crowd from the areas further out. Soon there were half a dozen automatics spitting viciously into the slit in the falls, and after a while Norvice tried the hat experiment again. He held it up along the ridge of the boulder at a dozen different angles, but there was no sign of a bullet hole in the crown when he drew it down.

"Well, that's the end of that!" he muttered, and stood up.

A twentieth of a second later he was down again with a hole in the crown of his hat.

"Hell!" he said wrathfully. "This looks like being a perennial job."

Josh Henderson came creeping up. "What's the big idea?" he asked. "Shootin' a couple of salmon for breakfast?"

Norvice grinned, and called a hurried council.

"Look here, boys," he said. "Magain and Coldwater Griff are back there behind the falls, pot-shottin' at everything that shows up ten yards either side of this boulder. The roar of the falls kills the sound of their guns, and there's been a grand selection of dumb epitaphs whizzin' around here this last five minutes. Bill Haines stopped one; he's over there under the horse blanket. But the other two are penned in there behind the falls—and I want 'em!"

"It'll be a long job, Norvice."

"You said it. They've got some sort of hidden tunnel to that ledge and we can't find it. It probably comes to surface in a clump of bushes. Anyway, we've hunted all night and haven't struck it, so it seems as though we shall have to starve 'em out. I'll get the troopers and the rest of the boys up here, and we'll just keep on picketing the whole locality till they say it with a white flag. Those bad actors probably have a stock of canned grub in there, but we'll get 'em if I have to stay here till the falls freezes."

"Wal, they sure won't go short of water," remarked Henderson, gazing across at the tumbling volumes. "I'm going back to Cedar Falls before noon; I'll send the boys up, or as many as care to tackle it. Your men can manage all right during daylight, but you'll want half the village picketed up here after dark."

"Yes, but I'll want you up here for a bit. I'll get Nell to go back for the boys. Hey, Nell!"

"Hello!"

"Say, will you go back—it's a hurry call—and round up the boys in——"

"Not me. You run your own damn errands."

"Why, what's the matter?"

"I ain't on the Mounted's pay-roll."

Norvice bit his lip, as a titter of laughter sounded. "Well," he muttered, "I'm not blaming you. Sorry I asked you. I wasn't trying to give you orders. I was just asking a favor."

"Well, don't. My memory goes back longer than twenty-four hours."

"Well, have it as you like." Norvice's voice suddenly snapped fire. "See here, you've been down in that hut under the falls, haven't you?"

"Oh, it's been my week-end bungalow, off and on."

Norvice leaned over and gripped her arm. "Then you know the way down," he growled. "Where is it?"

"If I was a man I'd go an' find it!"

Norvice breathed hard. "Nell," he said doggedly, "you're going to tell me where that tunnel is or—or you're going to join that bunch going up to Dawson tomorrow."

"Is that straight stuff?"

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"Dead straight, Nell."

The girl looked at him good and hard for many seconds. There was a wistful defiance in her shrewd eyes.

"All right then. I'll tell you," she said. "I always get down to the ledge this way: I get in a canoe about half a mile back up the Little Cedar, and I paddle her out to midstream. Then I let the current take me till I get to the edge of the falls, where I give one loud yell and over I go. Bully catches me halfway down; he leans outa the shack door with a tea-tray in his hand and I land right on it."

A roar of laughter greeted her sally.

"And please, Sergeant," she finished, "can I have a horse for that journey up to Dawson? I'd hate to be seen walking in that low company."

Norvice nodded curtly. "All right, have it your own way," he said. "You'd better get down into Cedar Falls, in the meantime. Won't be much use you trying to light out, either. I'd have you back inside two hours." He looked over at the boss of the Come Inside. "Henderson, you'll have to do that little commission for me," he said. "Send 'em all up. Tell 'em we've got the last of the gang where they can't do nothin' but squeal. We'll fix 'em tonight."

But they did no such thing. The two outlaws trapped in behind the roaring falls fought like demons. They held on to their last stronghold with reckless resperation. All day and half the night bullets hummed round the boulder if so much as a bit of gorse swayed in the wind.

Norvice set his outposts with skill. Every yard of scrub, every patch of bush and every clump of trees within half a mile of the falls was covered by guns from two different angles.

Days passed, several of the besiegers were wounded by flying bullets, but the gang held out. June and Endersley went back into the village. Endersley still had the greater part of his outfit to get together, and the winter was drawing on. A numbing, razor-like nip crept into the winds, and the winds themselves swung slowly back round the compass, from southeast to northwest. In four days the mosquitoes died. The thousands and millions of them that had been a plague to existence in the out-of-doors were obliterated as the winds went round. The grass midges survived a day longer. But on that day the thermometer touched down to freezing point for the first time, with the sun above the horizon.

It is a bad season in the Klondike, the season that slips in like a thin sliver between summer and winter. All around the stark hand of winter wrote the fierce message of its coming; wrote it on the gaunt poles of the fir and pine, on the stripped lacework of spruce and larch, on the dry crackled skeletons of the undergrowth; wrote it on the first frost-hung gauze of the morning air, on the cold white light of the midnight stars—on the snow-line crawling farther down the mountains every day.

There came the first faint powderings of snow along the trails and summer ponds, and little blue lakes were brittle with ice by the time the aurora ceased its wonder-dances on the wall of the Northern night.

Endersley had finished buying his outfit and was waiting impatiently for the moment to make his jump. He was shadowed day and night not only by the old-timers in Cedar Falls, but by the agent of the Skagway Syndicate, who dogged him with a grim purposefulness that told him he would have to fight for every inch of his ground. For a couple of days he had been up at the falls with Norvice watching the last stages of the fight with Griff and Magain.

"Holding out well, aren't they?" said Endersley, squinting out from behind the boulder.

"Running short of ammunition," commented the Mounted man. "Maybe their grub's giving out, too, but they've been mighty shy with their gun-play lately. Only ten shots today, twelve yesterday. I reckon they're about all in."

"Hope you're right. I'd like to see 'em landed before I head North."

"Sure thing. You'll be going soon, won't you?"

"Any day now. Any hour."

"Come over to the shack. I want a word with you, Endersley."

They crawled away from the boulder and walked to the shack that the outlaws had used occasionally at the head of the falls. It was the same shack that had seen Sitka Charley's first encounter with Magain. Charley had rediscovered the shack in the first survey after the capture of Magain's gang. Norvice had hoped to find the tunnel head in or near it,

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but a critical search over every yard of the ground showed that wherever it was, the gang had been too cute to build a shack anywhere near it.

Norvice kicked the door open and went in. Endersley followed and saw him pull out a small square package from his breast pocket. There was a strained, worried look on the sergeant's face as he opened it out, and his lips were pressed into a thin bitter line that made him look more than ever like a stern hawk of the mountains. He laid on the table a letter and a charred, half-burnt proclamation with three bullet holes between the eyes of the three blackened faces portrayed thereon.

"Endersley," he said, "I want to talk to you about several things, and this is one of them." He pointed to the bullet holes. "I did that. And in doing so I chucked my honor on the table. Either I take Magain and Griff, or—I'm through with the Mounted."

"You'll get 'em all right. What's the matter, losing your nerve?"

Norvice clicked his teeth and looked sourly at the young prospector. "Not on truck like that," he growled. "Listen. I'm dead serious. I may not be alive to talk to you after I leave this shack, and there's a few things I've got to get square. One thing I must ask you. I've just had it from headquarters that you've made arrangements to cross the boundary. Is that so?"

"Accurate information, Ralph, but don't blab it around this side for the love of Mike."

"Not a chance. I'm not going to ask you for the dead reckonings of your strike. That knowledge would start up too strong an itch in my own feet. But what I do ask you is this, is it on American or Canadian ground?"

"Yankee. A hundred miles beyond the border."

"Hell! My uniform don't operate a yard beyond the Canadian line!"

"Well, you've got them tied up here."

"Yes, but suppose they manage to wriggle out of that rat-trap? They're sure to head for where they think your strike is. And I must get 'em. I *must*. I'll be the laughing stock of every gin mill from Norton Sound to Hudson's Bay if I don't."

"I can't see that I can help you," said Endersley, "but I'd like an hour with those devils myself."

"That won't help me any," said Norvice. "I want 'em where the rest of the gang are. If they get clear you'll have to keep track of 'em till I can get out of this uniform and on their trail."

"Oh-h-h," said Endersley, in a long breath. "I get you."

"That's it. If they give me the slip and get across the border I swear right here and now to quit the Force and rope 'em in. They're going to get what the rest of the bunch got."

"And that was?"

"Fifteen years solid. Every blamed one of them. Had the notification down from Dawson this forenoon."

"Did that include Nell?" Endersley asked the question with his eyelids half-closed.

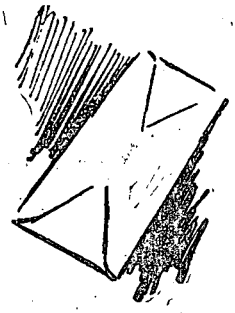
Norvice looked at him oddly, and the fierceness went out of his voice. "No," he muttered. "Nell wasn't included. She cleared. Nell was—you see—oh, well, I gave her a straight tip to fade—and she did."

"You've been mighty rough on that kid, Norvice."

"I know it. How could I help it? The Mounted ain't a man, it's a machine. If Magain and Griff get clear I'll still blame Nell for it, but only God himself knows how near I've been to sending in my papers when I've had to get rough with that girl. Sometimes only those bullet holes kept the color of my coat red."

"Ralph, I can almost see your way of looking at it. But, still, I think you tripped up badly over Nell; you let your own idea of your job get away with you."

Norvice sat on the edge of the table and picked up the letter. He looked at Endersley square in the eyes. "I owe Nell but one apology," he said stiffly. "It's here in this letter. Nothing more than an admission that I was wrong about her in one thing, and—er—a word of thanks for risking her life to come up and warn me about the danger spot near the boulder. I wouldn't bother you at all in this matter, but I'd like Nell to get it."



Endersley took the letter from him in silence and put it in an inside pocket in his furs.

"In a couple of hours I shall probably be a dead man," went on Norvice. "I've got an idea I know where that tunnel head comes up, and I'm going to walk over and take a look. The chances are a hundred

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to one that I'll be flattened out as soon as I see it, but maybe I'll have time to sing out either yes or no. And that'll be enough for my boys. The only place we haven't searched yet is just that twenty square yards we haven't been able to search—the patch of ground in front of that boulder between the rock and the side of the drop. They commanded it, but it's there where the tunnel head comes up, I'll stake my life on it. And I'm going to have a look."

Norvice stood up. "You'll be hitting out for the North before many more suns are up," he went on. "You'll meet Nell. Your trails are bound to cross. She knows where your strike is, and she's sure to head up that way to be in the thick of it when the fun starts. If my number goes up when I leave that boulder I'd like you to keep that letter and give it to her. And tell her, if you care to, that I handed in my checks because she was too damn self-righteous to turn up a crowd of murderers. If the one chance in a hundred comes off and I come back with the breath still in me, give me that letter back."

"There's one other thing—concerns the contingency I've already mentioned. If those skunks get clear between now and when you jump off, leave me a trail to follow. Blaze the firs with the Mounted's mark and put an E under it. Good day, Mr. Endersley. I wish you luck beyond the border and—in that other big adventure." Sergeant Norvice wheeled and went out through the door, folding the tattered, charred paper as he went.

Endersley sat on in the little shack for a long while. "Scratch a man of the Mounted and you find a mixture of steel and gold," he muttered to himself. "Scratch a bit deeper and you come to a little iron-bound box marked Duty. Let's go and see what's doing at the boulder."

X.

WHEN he got to the head of the falls he found Norvice and his troopers in earnest council under the shelter of the great rock. Each of them had volunteered to crawl round the boulder when they heard what was in their chief's mind; and their offer had been received with frigid refusal. Only one of them questioned the sergeant's wisdom.

"Oi'm after thinkin' thim swabs down there 'ud count it a win for them if they dhrapped a bullet into ye instead av wan av us," said that individual. "Maybe 'twad be all for the best if 'twas Oi meself that took a little squint down there by——"

"Trooper O'Donohue, I'll trouble you for no further help than a shut mouth," cut in Norvice. "I'm not going to crawl round in front of this rock; I'm going round on my two feet, upstanding. I'll be able to do it quicker that way, and I'll get a better view. I'll be able to see more. Two of you will cover me as well as you can without exposing yourselves, but, understand this, you won't shoot till you get my order. Your guns might crack off just when I'm saying it, and from what I've seen of their marksmanship I'll only get the chance to speak once. I don't want to be interrupted. If the tunnel head is there, you'll wait for darkness and make a rush for it. That all clear?"

"Yes."

"Has there been much firing from them while I've been gone?"

"Hasn't been a bullet all afternoon, Sergeant."

"You boys fired any?"

"Not since midday."

"So well and good; they may be a second or two off their guard. They must sleep some time."

Without a moment's hesitation Norvice suddenly stood upright and jumped round in front of the stone. Those behind it heard six rapid footsteps as he ran forward. There was a tense, electrical silence. Endersley and the troopers heard each other's labored breathing, and a horrible tingling prickle was racing up and down their spines. Their ears were straining feverishly for Norvice's shout—and more feverishly still for the drone of the bullets overhead.

Nothing happened.

"T' hell wid them." Trooper Donohue straightened up and the rest, as though thankful for the example, stood bolt upright beside him.

The sight that met their eyes sent a quick thrill to their hearts. Norvice was standing at the edge of what seemed to be a small pit or well a few yards beyond the boulder. He was staring with fixed intensity at the gap in the falls, where Bully Magain and Coldwater Griff, with the white waters thundering down about them, stood on the ledge and shook their fists at the man in scarlet and blue.

"Don't shoot, they haven't a bullet left between them." Norvice's voice came clearly back to them.

That was the truth of it; the two outlaws had fought till they were cleaned out. They were sodden and dripping with the

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spray that rose eternally behind the falls, and it was plain that starvation was stamping its mark upon their frames. But for all that, standing out at the last edge of desperate extremity, they mouthed their blasphemous curses at the men who upheld the law.

Norvice turned to his troopers. "Go down and get 'em," he said.

Three of them grinned and went scrambling away down into the tunnel head.

The outlaws saw them drop out of sight and then the other three on the bank saw an act of such superb animal courage that even Norvice refrained from pulling his gun on them. He couldn't. He stood there spellbound. Griff and Magain looked wildly into each other's eyes for a brief, helpless second, then, with a last insane yell they leaped out into the great volume of the falls.

Norvice's binoculars were out in a flash. Down in the seething vortex, at the base of the falls two pigmy figures were tossing and buffeting about among the whirls and boiling eddies.

"Any rocks there?" asked Endersley.

"Don't think so. There's granite and basalt ledges, but they missed them; the river's too full to show them. Look! They're swimming! Both of 'em. Gosh, they're getting clear!"

Endersley, shading his eyes, saw the two men battling painfully in the current that swept out like a millrace from the great whirlpool at the foot of the spuming falls. In a minute they were bobbing and dipping in the calm water beyond the flux.

"After 'em," shouted Norvice. "They'll make the bank!" There was a swift scurry and scatter as the troopers ran down the steep sloping escarpment of the falls. At the bottom there began a desperate hunt for a canoe, a raft, anything to get them afloat. And over on the opposite bank Magain and Griff waded slowly ashore, and turned and spat their contempt at the stampeding troopers before heading into the bushes.

Norvice was biting his lips with rage. There was not a boat on the whole beach. He recalled his men—the only way of getting on their trail was to get up beyond the falls and cross over Little Cedar River, a six hours' run at least.

The news of the escape spread quickly through Cedar Falls and every man turned out to assist in the chase. They trailed the outlaws to a miner's shack where they had helped themselves to dry clothes, grub and a few clips of ammunition. From there the trail led through four miles of rugged, tangled bushland to the Yukon water edge.

"Gone to water." growled Norvice. "Probably paddling all night and sleeping all day."

For six days and nights the party combed the river banks; outposts were notified up and down stream, but on the seventh day Cedar Falls gave it up in disgust.

And there was another sad shock waiting for its inhabitants when they got back to the village. The first arrival came flying back along the trail with the news.

"Hi, boys, we're sold!" he yelled.

"What's up?"

"It's Endersley! He's gone!"

"What!"

"Gone! Cleared out! Him and the gal. Gone five days, Henderson says."

Then there was pandemonium in Cedar Falls. For overhead the snow masses were forming. In a little while the vast white blanket would be falling upon the earth, blotting out all sight and trace of men going to and fro in the wild, when hundred-mile trails are obliterated in an hour, and when men who lose the trail lose it for good.

The news flashed round from camp to camp and miners and trappers who had been out on the hunt for the last of the Magain gang came pouring back from all directions. Cedar Falls filled up and overflowed in mad delirium. For hundreds came with them. The close-guarded secret of the summer months was out. It raced abroad in a flying babel of excited tongues. Up and down river the story flew, and men who had been silent since the day Endersley tottered down out of the back country, shouted aloud of the disgraceful trick played upon them.

Gold! The word whizzed round the excited outcamps like a prickle of red-hot fire. Gold! In lumps and sacksful and sledge-loads. Gold! Within dog-run of the Boundary! Found and lost again; given and snatched back again just when their tormented hands were clutching up to grasp it.

Radford, Gold-Bottom, Klondike, Last Chance—all the centers round Dawson—Bonanza, Sulphur, Dominion, Caribou,

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vomited their quota onto the river banks and shot them yelling up into Cedar Falls. They roared into the settlement in a frantic, gold-mad flood.

Rumors went zipping about the camp from mouth to mouth, always finding fresh ears and fresh tongues as fresh hordes poured in: Endersley had been killed by a rockslide started by the Magains high up in the Harpers; Endersley had pegged ground in Cedar Falls itself; Endersley had been bluffing—never made a strike at all; by this time he was over the Rockies and headed for the Mackenzie. And so it went.

Cedar Falls couldn't hope to hold the stampeding horde. Some cleared out almost as soon as they landed in; little, resolute parties of old-timers who threw their grub and courage into a common pool and headed out on the bare chance of picking up Endersley's trail or of making a lucky hit at some outpost or other where they could tell for a certainty that Endersley had passed that way.

But most stayed on, keyed up and tied down to the hope that reliable news would come through. With emergency kits strapped to their backs, they hung on and waited for something to which they could pin their faith before setting out on a rush, which they knew from old experience would resolve itself into a terrific exposition of the survival of the fittest.

Grub jumped a dollar a pound in the first hour and there was precious little to sell. By nightfall it was standing out at four dollars a pound, any sort, from iron pork to sack flour. And there were no sellers. Faro joints and roulette boards appeared as running concerns in less time than it took to pick camp sites. Josh Henderson put away his stampeding kit. He no longer had need of it. Josh had found his gold mine behind the bar of the Come Inside.

And then, out of the whirlpool of excitement, rumor and counter-rumor, scraps of real information began to get through. It was not got easily, for the old-timers were unwilling to tell. They regarded the interlopers with a sour animosity that blazed to life in a score of brawls before the night was through.

"D'ye hear that?" roared one. "Boss of the saloon here says he's seen the stuff! Seen the specimens they brought down with them. Bigger'n hens' eggs they was. Scooped 'em out of a single pocket, he says. Boss reckons, from talks he's had with Endersley, she must be the biggest heap of pockets ever c'lected under one skyline. Gawd! Where is it—*where is it?*"

"Ain't a word crep' out. There's only two of 'em in on it. Him and his Sitka—and the rest is as stranded as we are. They've kep' it closer'n a clam, them two. Ain't left a clue noways. Sky-pilot here says they're aimin' to send word through to the falls after they've got through and staked."

"Yes, like hell they will!"

"That's what the parson says anyways. Mad when they hit it. Dead-beat. Snow in the head; ice in the lungs. The blamed fools never drove stakes."

Another one hurried up hot-foot from the Come Inside, the exchange center for all news.

"Say!" he snarled. "Thar's a gal in on this! A good looker, accordin' to the talk back there. Got Endersley wrapped round her little finger, so they say. Rustle her out, boys; we kin make her talk!"

"Aw! Talk nothin'. Endersley's yanked her along with him. Had it from Henderson himself. Said Cedar Falls would be holy hell when the stampede hit it, and that hell wasn't no place for an angel. That's the way he is about her. Mad in love. Aw! They make me tired!"

"Well, how in thunder did he get clear?" boomed an angry voice.

"Sent her and the Indian away days ago. Betcher life they've been waitin' at some quiet rendezvous with the outfit till he showed up. They're the best part of a hundred miles clear by now. And look at the snow!"

The yellow snow-gloom dropped lower. The clouds seemed almost to have settled over the treetops. The light failed until it was little more than the thick afterglow of a quiet sunset. And the clouds began strewing their armies in white sweeping cataracts.

The snow obliterated all but itself. It swirled and raced along in straight horizontal lines, wind-driven. In an hour all color had faded from the land; it merged, melted and dissolved in that great vista of white that would remain unchanged till the summer swung round again to break it up.

"Boss of the North," said Josh Henderson

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across his bar, "is puttin' its blamed shirt on. After that will come its weskit, its woollies, its coat and then its overcoat. After that maybe we'll have a bit of snow."

And Cedar Falls, at the high-strung limits of exasperation, stood and watched. Without being able to lift a finger to prevent it, it saw its great chance slowly and gently erased by the falling snow. Sullen cloud-squadrons banked up and stolidly emptied themselves over the inert countryside, seeming to mock them silently. Trails faded and vanished as the minutes ticked by.

The footprints of the last arrivals were obliterated almost before their clamorous demands for hot gin in the Come Inside were complied with. There began that most tremendous of all Northern phenomena, the freeze-up of a whole mighty continent.

And somewhere right out there in the snow haze two men and a girl were laying a trail that was heading along to more gold than Cedar Falls had ever seen in its life, a trail that moved onward mile by mile, and yet was never more than a mile in length, a trail that was being blotted out by the snow armies almost as fast as the snowshoes laid it. And Cedar Falls, not even knowing which point of the compass to take, sat at its fires and expended much violent vituperation.

Along toward evening Devereaux pulled in with the mails. Among them was a letter addressed to Sergeant Ralph Norvice. It was from Endersley, and had been five days in the post, although the postmark was that of Cedar Falls. Norvice grinned at the address—"Sergt. Ralph Norvice, R. N. W. M. P., % Circle City." It had had to make the run out to Circle and be redirected from there. Besides a letter it contained an open sheet, which Norvice posted in a conspicuous place. It was addressed to the old-timers of Cedar Falls, and was in the nature of an open letter.

Boys:

I had to make my getaway as slick as this for reasons you yourselves will best appreciate. I haven't staked my claims, and if a stampede caught me up now, the chances are I never would.

I'm asking all you Cedar Falls boys to hang on down there till you get word from me. I'll be waiting here to give you a line on the best locations—and the rest will be up to you. I reckon there's about enough to go round. Wish me good going.

Luck to you,

Robert Endersley.

A full-chested yell of relief went up from the genuine Cedar Falls citizens when that notice went up. Then they settled down to wait.

XI

THE morning broke fair and fine. Cedar Falls peeped out of its cabins and canvas and rubbed its eyes at the oddity. There was not a cloud in the sky. There was a foot of snow down and a hard frost gripping the land, when, by all normal usages, the snow should be at least a yard deep—four in the drifts—and thawing rapidly.

That was the usual way of it, a long and heavy first fall over two or three days, then a thaw to give it a substantial foundation of ice and then the final freeze with a blizzard every day for a month. There should be wet, lowering skies after the first fall, with even an occasional rain or sleet squall. But here was a clear sky that looked likely to hold another snowfall for days and days.

Groups of the invaders inharnessed and hit out on trails all over the compass. A trail broken on that crust would remain

bold and clear until the next fall of snow—and they were out to find any trail that held out a promise of having been made by two men and a girl. The snow, by holding off, had made pursuit possible.

Behind the straining dogs, far to the north, the same idea was running through Endersley's head. He rubbed his chin reflectively and looked up at the blue of the sky.

"June," he said, "get on the sledge. The snow's hanging off and your footprints could be followed up by a blind man. Charley and I will break trail ahead."

They were on beyond the Harpers, past Mount King and Ogilvie River, right up on a line with the Canadian-Alaskan boundary. The Nahoni Mountains poked their staring white summits up into the sky on the eastern skyline, the twin peaks of Dewdney and Burgess sparkling beyond. Boundary Mountain was in line ahead, a far shining bastion of the Porcupine River country, wide and empty, the first of the

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great peaks beyond the Arctic Circle on the boundary route.

It was difficult country there, untenanted emptiness, slashed across and across by high-shouldered divides and long chains of broken foothills—the heart of the no-gold country.

Endersley knew it. He had chosen that route because of it. It was taking him miles out of his way, but he was getting through on a trail along which there were no tongues to wag to those who might follow after. Only once had they encountered traces of humans—down by Mount Klotz, when they turned direct north. It was a camp, temporarily deserted, while its owners were, apparently, replenishing their larder in the woods.

Endersley avoided even that, sheering off in a wide detour to leave it away to eastward. After that they had seen nothing. And they blessed every hour and every succeeding mile that gave them naught but complete solitude. Here and there Endersley picked out a fir tree and blazed it with the badge of the Mounted. On the seventh day out the sky began to fill again, and they breathed their thankfulness to the dancing sundogs.

They made camp and fed and rested the team. The going had been good, despite the broken nature of the country, and, by travelling early and late, they had covered a lot of ground since leaving Mount Klotz behind. Now, only a few miles ahead, Boundary Mountain, buttressed by the ten-mile sweep of the Upper Ramparts, frowned down at them in white splendor. It was at Boundary Mountain that Endersley was aiming to turn west, cross the demarcation posts, and head through to the Yukon at the Great Curve. By that route they would get into heavier going, but they would miss all the little settlements with their myriad criss-cross trails along the great Porcupine River.

June had gone into the timber to collect wood while he and the Indian pegged down the tent and got the fires going.

"We 'bout halfway, huh?" said Charley.

"Just about half. We cross the posts tonight. Flour got a bit damp?"

"Always does when the snow stays up." Charley melted a pan of snow over the fire and beat the flour into a thick cream. Later a round pile of flapjacks, crisp and goldy brown, were standing in a tin in the embers, while Charley set about the bacon.

"Say, Charley, where's our little girl?"

"Was going to ask, boss. She's been gone——" Charley broke off from sawing through a slab of marble-hard pork and pointed with the saw-edged knife. "Boss, there's that dog of hers actin' queer."

Endersley looked over at the woods. Sunnygold was standing out at the edge of the timber, yapping on a staccato note, running backward and forward in little circular movements. She saw Endersley looking at her, sat back on her haunches, and gave tongue to the pack howl.

"Boss, she's worrit," said Charley decisively.

Endersley dropped his axe and went across to her. She scampered away into the trees and led him in a direct line to June, a limp heap under a stunted pine. He saw in a minute what had happened. Some huge bough, snow-laden, had crashed down on her as she had passed. That it had not knocked her wholly unconscious at once was evidenced by the fact that her tracks showed that she had got up and staggered forward a little way after the accident. Endersley could see her zigzag trail to where she lay.

Without moving her he made a deft examination. She had collapsed from pain as much as anything. He located trouble in both her right shoulder and ankle, and he knew it was trouble that would take long in mending. He picked her up in his arms and carried her back to the camp. Her cap had fallen off and her hair was trailing over his shoulder. Sunnygold ran along at his side with her cap in its mouth, her sharp eager eyes full of alarm and concern.

Charley had fitted up the collapsible stove inside the tent and he had got the burners going strong with compressed fuel. Blankets and furs were spread in the corner away from the tent flaps, and in a bubbling billy over the cooking fire the Indian was fusing strong coffee. The fresh, pungent smell of it came out to meet Endersley at the clearing.

"I had an idea something happen to our gal," said the Sitka anxiously. "That dog was all het up all ways. Bad?"

"No danger to the head, thank goodness. Branch fell on her. Nasty crack on the shoulder, but the ankle will be the worst trouble, I'm afraid."

"Going to hang us up, boss?"

"'Fraid so, Charley. June wouldn't faint for a pin-prick."

The Indian looked up at the massing clouds and went out for wood, while Endersley tended June in the tent.

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Her ankle had swollen badly, and was red and inflamed. Endersley diagnosed it as a very bad sprain.

When she came to and got her bearings, she found herself snugly tucked away under the bear furs with the fire roaring away beside her. Her ankle was tightly bound in a wet bandage and her shoulder ached and throbbed. Outside she could hear the dull mutter of the two men's voices as they sat at the cooking fires.

"Bad go, boss, huh?"

"Mm! That ankle of hers will hurt like blazes for at least a week. And she won't be able to put a snowshoe on for longer than that." Endersley's voice was troubled and worried.

"Can't carry her, boss?"

"Her shoulder's too bad. The jolting about on that sledge would half-kill her."

Sitka Charley raised his head and gazed up the trail at the upflung summit of Boundary Mountain, ablaze with the crimson and gold of the setting sun.

"Nanayak's place along there, boss," he said gravely. "Going to make it?"

"There's not much else for it, old scout. We shall have to get her along there somehow—pick out all the level patches and break trail as flat as we know how. We must get her under cover, anyway; can't have her laying out here with the blizzards waiting to burst over us."

"Startin' now, boss, 'fore the sun git's right off?"

"We'd better. Wonder if old Nanayak still remembers us."

They got her on the sledge at the unavoidable expense of five minutes' agony, and started out for Half-and-Half, the little trading-post that squats on the river at the foot of the towering Boundary peak.

Half-and-Half is an odd little settlement. It straddles the boundary, half in Alaska and half in Canada. It boasted a fairly comfortable rest-house, a great long barn of a place right in the very center of the village, owned by one Nanayak, an Alaskan born, but sired of an old Aleut from down below Norton Sound.

He was a fine old character, and rumor up that way accredited him with fabulous wealth, all gained from the exemplary position in which he had built his wayside hotel. He set it across the boundary, and installed therein a movable gambling outfit. When the Canadian police, acting on protests of players came galloping up to the door, all hands seized the table and shoved it across into American territory, ten yards beyond their jurisdiction. And when the American posse came bearing down on him they shoved it back into Canada, and continued their play with a magnificently assumed innocence of the existence of the law.

The Porcupine River is a busy one for one so far north, and his place, the Fifty-Fifty, was mostly full. Endersley and Charley had called in there on their last run, when they were working down-river from further east.

They were both breaking trail with exaggerated care, and Nanayak had been watching them for some minutes from his doorway. Voyagers coming in from that direction were few and far between. It was not a recognized trail and was unsafe, especially after a first fall. He went out to have a look at the newcomers.

Nanayak did remember them. He most certainly did. He went swinging down the trail to meet them, while June, lashed on a pile of soft stuff on the sledge, earnestly assured Endersley that her foot would be all right in the morning, and that if it wasn't, he was to leave her at Nanayak's and push on ahead with Charley. The idea seemed to tickle Endersley.

"Hello, Bob!" called Nanayak, a huge smile of welcome on his toothless face. "Hello! How are yeh? Whatcha got on the truck? Howya been keepin'? Wheerya—oh, if he ain't found a lady!"

Nanayak approached the sledge with a half-fearful reverence, and, with hands on his knees, gazed down at the vision of totally unexpected loveliness looking up at him. "Say, wherya find her, eh?" he asked.

Endersley, grinning broadly behind his hand, took him aside, and explained a good deal; about the accident, about June, about Charley, about himself—a whole string of straight-faced lies to account for his presence there.

"I guessed sumpin' was wrong, Bob," agreed Nanayak. "Guessed it when I saw the way you and Charley were breakin' trail. Durn pretty gal, though, ain't she! And you wanta room for her, do you, till she's trail-fit? And you want it kep' quiet. Sure, that'll be easy. I'll get my missus to fix her up. Yep. Married

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las' fall. Blackfoot gal. Good as any. River's pretty full this season, Bob. Lotta new settlements springin' up along down. Wanta sell that lead-dog of yours? Hell of a good puller. I still git raided about twice a month; gamblin' laws are tough on this side the posts; liquor laws fierce on the other. What's her name? Sunny-gold? Thassa queer name for a stunner like her, ain't it? Sure I meant the gal! No, they ain't nabbed me yet. And they ain't goin' to. She'll be as happy as Larry with my gal. Sure."

All the way up to the Fifty-Fifty he kept up his ceaseless chatter. Here they carried June into his wife's own room, and the Blackfoot woman looked at her and touched her as one might look at and touch an exquisite piece of Dresden china.

"She'll be fine," said Nanayak, outside. "Say, Bob, where *didja* find her?"

They stabled their outfit in an outhouse and saw to the feeding of the dogs, while in the darkening room the Blackfoot woman tended to the sore needs of the white girl.

As Endersley was turning in that night there came a brief knock at the door and Nanayak entered. His overwhelming volubility was not quite so much in evidence. He spoke quietly, almost with restraint, and he stared Endersley straight in the eyes.

"Everything all right now?" he asked casually.

"Sure, doing fine."

"Gal all right—comfortable?"

"Yes, she's a lot easier, thanks to your wife. June's nearly in love with her."

"Been in and seen her?"

"Just left her; she's sleeping."

"What is she doing right up here?"

"Taking a trip round with me. What's eating you?"

Nanayak looked at him for a moment without moving a muscle. Then he bent his head forward and said, *"Where have you found gold, my son?"*

Endersley jumped.

Nanayak grinned. "Do you think I'm blind?" he said. "Or crazy? Do you think I'm a chechako up here? Do you fancy I'm outguessing two kinds of police *on luck?* Do you?"

Endersley looked hard at the saloon owner. Nanayak was known across half the mountains as one of the hardest old drivers in the North; to the other half he was known as one of the kindliest-natured men on earth. To both he was known as the cutest old hand in the game. And at that moment his forcefulness was showing on every line of him. The old Aleut was reputed to have made a million; and Endersley was beginning to know how. Nanayak could start a stampede as bad as anything out of Cedar Falls.

"My son, there's almost a hundred trailers within an hour of the Half-and-Half." The voice was infinitely insinuating.

"You—you're holding me up, eh?" said Endersley, sitting bolt upright in his chair.

"On my own terms, my son."

"What do you want, damn you. Do you know?"

"Yep."

"Well, out with it."

"I want," said Nanayak, with dreadful deliberation, "to be sent for as best man when you make that good looker of yours Mrs. Bob."

The old saloon-owner, chuckling profoundly, ambled away to his bar.

"What was up, boss?" asked a puzzled voice from the dark corner bunk.

Endersley sat on his own bunk with a gasping laugh of relief. "Nothing, old scout," he said. "Put up your gun! He was pulling my leg."

He went to rest that night with two nasty fears in his heart. One was that he had been leaving a clear trail behind him that would last until more snow fell, the other was that June's foot might take even longer to mend than he had first thought.

And both his fears were justified. Not only did the swelling in June's ankle take an obstinately long time in abating, but his up-trail had actually been found, accidentally, it is true, but beyond all question.

TWO figures, gross and forbidding, swung out of the big timber on the southern side of Mount Klotz. One had a haunch of young deer meat on his shoulder, the other carried a rifle and half a dozen birds tied by the legs. They traveled easily at a good pace on their snowshoes—men who were thoroughly at home in the snow-lands.

"Couldn't be better," said one, "considerin' all things."

He stopped and surveyed the scene. Quiet, calm, and unutterably peaceful, the great swinging miles of white country rolled away to the misty horizons.

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"A sight safer than the bluffs, anyway. I'm still wonderin' how the blazes that falls crowd managed to shin up two miles o' granite inside five minutes."

"Aw, forget it! We're safe, ain't we? Within a jump of the boundary when wanted—and no one ever comes within dogmiles of the place' 'cept Indians and fools and——". He stopped, a startled look in his morose eyes.

"Anything hit you, Bully?" Griff asked the question with a hint of concern in his voice.

"Look!" Magain's arm went out half-fearfully to a distinct trail that crawled along over the snows, some half-mile away.

"Norvice!" exclaimed Coldwater, a cold perspiration breaking out on his forehead. "He's laying up there on Klotz, dogging us. He's——"

But Magain only strode forward, and they approached the trail, staring at it long and earnestly.

"One—two—three!" muttered Griff, under his breath. "That'll be Norvice an' two troopers. Why the devil don't they open fire? They sure know they've got us dead to rights. I s'pose——"

Whatever he supposed never came to light. Magain had suddenly gripped his arm and was babbling away agitatedly.

"Look there, Griff!" he said hurriedly. "And there—and there! That third pair of snowshoes was never worn by a man! It's a gal's step and a gal's shoe! This is Endersley's party or I'm a Siwash. He's made his jump! It's him, and we'll be in at the death, or I've never seen gold in my life!"

As they traveled light, it was only two nights later that Magain pointed to the snowcrust as they hurried along.

"See?" he cried in triumph. "The gal's got onto the sled. Endersley's gettin' worried about the snow holdin' off."

Thirty-six hours after Endersley, June and Charley had pulled into the rest-house at Half-and-Half, Magain and Coldwater Griff were reconstructing the whole little drama of June's accident from the tell-tale prints in the snow. They got it word-perfect right down to the part played by Sunnygold.

They even pitched their tent and made camp on Endersley's last site.

"In the morning," said Magain grandly, "we'll just go along and have a few words with Mr. Endersley. I reckon we've got him where he can't wriggle. He'll have to share information or face a stampede!"

But Griff was scarcely heeding the thrilling words falling from Magain's mouth. His eyes were fixed dully on a fir tree at the edge of Endersley's northbound trail. That tree was blazed with the crest of the Mounted, and under it the initials R. E.

Magain stopped speaking, sensing trouble in his partner's attitude. His eyes followed Griff's line of sight to the fir tree. Then he, too, saw that portentous sign.

XII

THE long, plank-built bar of the Fifty-Fifty was warm and full. Nanayak, the Aleutian, believed in making things as comfortable as possible for his clients during those months when zero sat despotically upon the land. The ringing song of pick and shovel had ceased along the river banks, and the Porcupine itself flowed down to the Yukon under a four-foot ceiling of ice. Drifts lay piled in the workings.

Nanayak, being a business man, allowed credit to such as owned paying holdings of their own on the river, and, being human, he encouraged them to stay on and winter at the Fifty-Fifty. It was not a very difficult matter, for a warm, comfortable saloon is always vastly to be preferred to a month on an unbroken trail through the blizzards and gales of early winter.

Endersley and Sitka Charley had gone off into the woods to shoot dog meat. The Blackfoot woman had examined June's injuries that morning and her considered verdict was that June would be unable to walk on that ankle for at least a week. Endersley went in to see her and June had begged him to push on with Charley to his location, and leave her in the care of the Blackfoot woman to follow on as soon as she was able to travel. But Endersley wouldn't hear of it.

"I'll stay on here with you, little girl, though we lose seven weeks, let alone seven days," he declared.

Faced with the unexpected check of a week's delay, he took counsel with Charley, whose thoughts immediately ran to his precious dogs.

"If you buy grub for 'em, they eat more dollars than we got," he observed pithily. "We go shoot all they want. Shoot a lot. Plenty in the woods. Let 'em feed up. They have to move quick when our gal get better."

Bully Magain and Coldwater Griff watched them start out. Camped in the stunted timber on Boundary Mountain, they commanded a full view of the river

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settlement and all that morning had watched turn and turn about for developments round by the Fifty-Fifty.

Griff nudged his partner, asleep by the fire.

"There they go," he said. "Him and the Indian alone. No dogs, no gal, just them."

The two of them stood up and peered through the coverts. Endersley and Charley were just heading into the straggly woods on the far side.

"Guns," said Magain thoughtfully. "That means they're out for dog feed. And that means they're hung up for a bit. The gal, I s'pose. Hurt too bad to travel." He cursed slowly and sourly below his breath. "That's going to make it blamed awkward," he growled as an afterthought. "It'll give Norvice all the time he wants to get on his trail."

"Our trail!" muttered Griff. "What are we going to do about it?"

"I'm going down to the Fifty-Fifty!"

"You're mad!"

"I'm thirsty."

"But you——"

"Say, Griff, you've got more buts than a goat. I'm going down, anyway. You can stay here and warm your feet at the fire, if you like—I'm going. There's a few inquiries I'd like to make in Half-and-Half; and somehow I still think June Royal would be happier with us than with that dashin' cavalier of hers down there."

Griff grinned. "Bully," he said, "you have a kind heart."

"If everything is O. K. down there," Magain explained, "we may expect to take a little walk in the woods ourselves. A couple of extra rifle shots won't raise any curiosity in Half-and-Half, not till after. The only job then will be to grab the girl and make her squeal. She'll tell all right, if you treat her properly."

Nanayak nodded to them when they pushed the door open.

"G'morning, gents; pleased to see strangers around here. Which side did you come from? Didn't I see you heading down from Boundary Mountain way?

Sure I did. How's things up over? Where's your dogs? Had a good run down? How did that gold prospect pan out up over the mountains there? Heard about that——"

His voice trailed off. Nanayak was quick in the uptake.

Magain was looking at him. Coldly and flatly. He took a step toward the Aleut.

"Look here, bo, my name's Dumb!" he growled. "And my pard's name is Mute. And we are both deaf. Get me?"

Nanayak nodded cheerfully. All sorts and conditions drifted in and out of Half-and-Half, and he had grown used to them all. "Have it your own way," he said. "What do you want?"

Magain took him by the coat sleeve and piloted him to a corner, for many eyes were upon him. The two were not known that far north, but the type of trouble maker is easily recognizable. "I didn't come in here to answer any questions," Magain said darkly. "I came in to ask a few."

"You mean, you never expected to find so many two-fisted men in this saloon, eh? They know your sort at first sight. You'd better ask your questions and fade. What do you want to know?"

"How long has Bob Endersley been here?"

"That's the one thing they never learned me at school."

"When is he going?"

Nanayak gazed at the roof. "Funny! I never noticed that leak," he said.

"Meaning you don't know?" demanded Magain.

"Meaning all that and a little more!" declared the Aleut.

Magain bottled back his temper, realizing he'd gone the wrong way about eliciting information. "Is his gal hurt much?" he asked.

One or two of the men in the bar drew a little nearer. Bully's last question puzzled them. They hadn't heard of a girl coming to the Fifty-Fifty. So far as they knew, Endersley and the Indian had come in by themselves. Either these newcomers seemed to know more about the inside affairs of Half-and-Half than they did themselves, or Magain was putting a trick question to Nanayak, a question that concealed its real meaning. In either case their curiosity was aroused. They gathered nearer.

Nanayak looked worried. He scented trouble.

"I don't quite get you," he muttered. "Endersley certainly came in with as fine a lead dog as you'll find in any team in the North, but she wasn't hurt any. And up here we don't refer to 'em as gals."

Magain clicked his teeth. "I'm not asking about dogs," he said savagely. "I'm talking about——"

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"Well, talk to me about it, whatever it is!" suggested a youthful voice at his elbow.

Bully looked round slowly and stared in surprise at a slim youngster who had been grinning at him ever since he came in. He was still grinning, his hands deep in his trouser pockets, and he seemed to be vastly amused at the situation.

"Eh?" said Bully with an effort. Something seemed to have gone wrong with the universe.

"I said, 'talk to me about it,'" repeated the youth. "That's plain enough, ain't it? Why, you great hulking lout, I'd pull your nose for two pins!"

Bully blinked, his world reeling.

Then the youth leaned close and whispered in Bully's ear, "If you try any of your rough stuff here, you'll never get out alive. I know you all right, my boy. And you know me, don't you? So while you're in here you'll keep that ugly face of yours shut tight or I'll tell the boys who you are. And the reward for your carcass is for with or without breath! That's how much you're wanted. C'm on. You'd better come over into the U. S.—you'll be safer there."

Bully found himself being led to the far end of the bar. Arrived there he stared at his guide for a good minute. Then he peered closer and sighed in bewilderment.

"My God!" he breathed. "So it's you, is it?"

"Yes, Bully, it's me. And, believe me, you are going to behave yourself as long as I'm around. A lot of the boys here would like to share the reward money. For four pins I'd shoot you and old Coldwater there and claim the money myself."

"Where the hell did you spring from?"

"Landed in here just before dawn. And very glad to have arrived, Bully."

As they stared at each other, there came a sudden and violent commotion at the other end of the bar. A strident yell of "Police! Police!" thundered across the saloon, and every single soul in the Fifty-Fifty suddenly became galvanized into amazing activity.

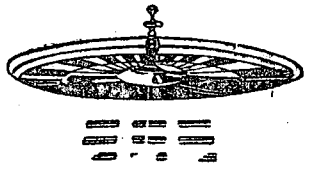
"All bets off!" shouted Nanayak at the roulette wheel. He grabbed the flickering ball and pocketed it. A score of hands seized tables and paraphernalia, and with a rush and a clatter the equipment of the Fifty-Fifty was shoved clean out of Canada and into Alaska.

Back went the ball and the spinning wheel and the life of the Fifty-Fifty picked up its interrupted swing exactly twenty-five seconds after the interruption began.

"Stake your bets, boys," droned Nanayak pleasantly. "Stake your bets, the ball's jumping and red is due for a turn-up. Five consecutive blacks, boys. It's bound to be a red this time. And a nice red policeman to watch fair play. What more could you want?"

The door had slammed open and a tall, clean-cut figure strode in. There was a fine devil-may-care independence about him as he came in with an unconscious swagger.

Not an eye turned in his direction. The old-timers of the Fifty-Fifty continued their various occupations as though completely unaware of his presence.



"Red wins," announced Nanayak from behind the wheel. "Pick up your winnings, boys, and stake again. Red was bound to win that time. Five blacks couldn't bust the sequence. Claim your winnings quickly—we may have the police around here at any moment."

Ralph Norvice grinned. He had heard of the movable equipment of the Fifty-Fifty before. He twirled an unlit cigar in his mouth and surveyed the scene, then struck a match.

"Watch me!" said a miner at the counter. "I'll make him jump." He whipped out his gun.

Norvice raised the match.

There was a report across the bar while the match was still a foot away from the cigar. The black stick of tobacco kicked in Norvice's mouth and three-quarters of it was blown off by the bullet. Without a tremor the match continued its course and poised steadily against the two-inch stub still left between his teeth. He drew carefully at it, inspected it, saw that is was burning, and sauntered toward the door. On the inside he nailed up the charred Government proclamation. The portion that had contained Bill Haines's portrait had been cut out, but the other two were still there, the bullet holes through their eyes.

He turned from the door. "I'd like a drink," he said.

"Sure," said Nanayak. "What'll you take?"

"I'll have a peg out of that bottle behind you."

"Which one, this?"

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Norvice drew his gun, fired, and returned it to his holster in a flash.

"No; that one with the neck off," he said. "I like it neat."

The man who had fired at his cigar came over. "Shake, Sergeant," he said. "I guess you learned to fly from the ground up. What's doing—looking for anyone particular or just in general?"

"I'm looking for two."

"Who?"

The sergeant pointed to the notice on the door. "Those two," he said.

The miner went over and inspected the pictures. He studied them for a few hard seconds with deliberation, and then squinted round the bar out of the corner of his eye. But Bully Magain and Coldwater Griff had gone. And they had gone out through the door that led to Alaska.

"Any strangers hereabouts this last forty-eight hours or so?" asked Norvice.

The other nodded noncommittally. Unless the man is wanted for murder the general trend of opinion is to let the Mounted do its own job.

"Oh, yes," he said. "The Porcupine has been filling up these last few weeks. There's been one or two strange faces drifting through lately. Chap named Endersley and an Indian came in the other day. Those the two you mean?"

Norvice shook his head.

"Young feller come along early today. Looked tired and hungry. Slight-built, sort of don't-care-a-cuss-for-anyone youngster. Is he one of 'em?"

Norvice shook his head again. "That all you've seen?"

"How many more do you want?" parried the other, and went back to his game. Norvice looked round for the "slight-built youngster," but he also was missing.

Had he but known it, at that precise moment the self-contained youngster with the undeniable hold on Bully Magain was sitting on the edge of June Royal's bunk, listening to her almost tearful pleadings to help her persuade Endersley to push on without her.

"Bless ya, that won't be very difficult, Miss Royal," the boy said. "Not half as difficult as trying to stop laughing at Bully."

June sighed. "You won't find it easy," she said wearily. "I've been pleading with him ever since this wretched accident happened. And all he does is to tell me to hurry up and get well. He *must* leave me here. Things are happening that make me feel nervous. There's Bully Magain and Coldwater Griff. They're here. And now Norvice has just landed in. That means that all Cedar Falls stampede may be on their way to us by now. If they overtake him he will have to fight like mad to stake any claims at all."

"Oh, don't you worry," said the youngster grandly. "I'll whisper something in his ear that will send him stampeding off as frantic as one of the Cedar Falls's bunch himself." He nodded confidently and slipped out.

Outside he got a shock. He ran into Norvice who took him by the shoulder and marched him into the barroom of the Fifty-Fifty. Norvice had been making a few inquiries on his own account, and he was more than curious to meet this particular youngster.

"Now, sonnie, where do you come in on this business?" he said grimly.

"You lemme go!" the other retorted defiantly. "You've got nothing on me, and I've got a job to do!"

"So have I," chuckled Norvice.

"Well, get on with it then, and let me do mine. See here, Mr. Clever, you're out chasing Bully Magain and Coldwater Griff, aren't you? Well, all the time you're messing around here, you're losing chances. Those two are out on Endersley's heels by now! They've got a camp up on Boundary Mountain, and they came down today to raise Cain in this joint. But I had the right to stand them off."

Norvice was staring at him hard, his face was white, and it was the face of a man whose soul is facing struggle and chaos. He was at the crossroads; on one hand his oath to the Mounted, on the other his desire for vengeance on the outlaws who had fled beyond the jurisdiction of the Mounted. A terrific storm of emotion was battling through to its climax under his scarlet tunic.

Suddenly he decided. Slowly his hands crawled up to his uniform buttons and fingered them. One by one they were pulled open. Then with an effort that was violently mental as well as physical he broke the trance-like hold of eye and eye. He faced round to the charred picture on the door. *"Magain—I'm coming!"* he cried, chilled steel in his

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voice. He pulled off his coat, the splendid coat with its proud stripes and glittering badges of rank and authority and flung it in a heap in the corner. "Crossed the Boundary, have you!" He glared at the picture. "Then I'm crossing the Boundary, too! They'll say I deserted the Mounted, and post me as a traitor, but it'll be man to man with you, Magain."

Then, oblivious of the staring crowd around him, he turned—faced the slim figure of the youth beside him—and held out his arms.

"Nell!" he said. "And that fixes the trouble about no married men in the Mounted, too," he went on, a twinkle in his eye.

The girl, for one miraculous second, looked at him, her lips trembling, then Norvice with a bound caught her as she fell.

WHEN the hours had passed and Endersley came back with food for the dogs, he was met at the edge of the timber by a new and transformed Nell. A Nell whose face and figure were alive with the new born radiance of peace and joy. She caught him by the coat lapels.

"Bless my soul—Nell!" he exclaimed. "How on earth did you get here?"

Nell ignored the question. "Mr. Endersley," she said very deliberately, "are you going to start out for your gold mine tonight?"

"I certainly am not," said Endersley flatly.

"You certainly are," she assured him, with deadly certainty.

"Why am I?" he asked.

"Because June wants you to. Because it's the sensible thing to do. Because the stampede is on the way. Because, if you don't, Mr. Endersley, I'm going straight to June Royal, and tell her where she can find that lost brother of hers."

"You—you won't!" gasped Endersley.

"Won't I?" came the ferocious answer. "Your going would prevent my man's becoming a murderer."

"Your *what?*" Endersley looked at her in blank astonishment.

"My man! Ralph Norvice *is* my man, and he's quit the Mounted! Quit cold! They'll call it desertion back at headquarters, but he's after the Magains. He's across the Alaska border looking for 'em with a gun; if he gets 'em he'll keep that fool oath of his, and with the result that he will be wanted for murder."

Endersley gasped, but she went breathlessly on.

"So you've got to leave *now*. Magain will light out on your trail—and Norvice will think he's still about here. I'll see that he does. Once you're away, if you and Sitka Charley can't take care of those two pikers, you don't deserve anyone to fight your battles. But Norvice mustn't find 'em on American territory. I want my husband a free man, so it is up to you to go quick—June Royal or no June Royal."

There was passion smoldering in Nell's eyes, and she faced him—grim purpose in every line of her figure.

"Nell," Endersley said, "you drive a hard bargain!"

"You'll go?"

"I'll have to see June first."

"Then you are going! June says she can wait for you at Circle City. You'll have to register there. She'll wait for you on the river trail when you come down from location. She won't come to any harm. I'll be with her. And maybe Nanayak and a bunch from here. But you do take some persuading. I never knew a man who wanted so much pushing into a million."

Endersley studied her for a moment and then pulled out an oilcloth envelope.

"Yes, I'll go, Nell, but you'll have to do something, too. June Royal isn't all I have to think of after I stake my claim."

"What is it you want?"

"Well, I told the boys down in Cedar Falls that I'd send them word about the new location. I told them that they should have first shot at anything going."

Nell nodded. "That's fair enough," she said.

"I've got to get that message through to them. I think I'm safe enough now to send it back. It's all in this letter—the exact location of the strike and the quickest trails through to it. There will be others trailing us now, and it'll have to be got down quick. Will you do it?"

Nell held out her hand for the envelope.

"Yes," she answered. "I'll see they get it all right."

"Give it to Josh Henderson at the Come Inside. As the boys drift in for drinks he'll whisper the word to 'em. I want 'em to have a clear start on that other crowd that landed in at the Falls when I hit the trail. And, just a moment, Nell." He bent down and whispered in her ear long and earnestly—and at his words Nell chuckled.

"You're no better than the rest," she

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laughed. "But I won't forget; I shall be wanting him for myself."

XIII

GRAY dawn, bleak and bare, was breaking under lowering skies. Dull winds were pressing up from the Yukon Flats far to the southward, wetting the crust of the first fall and dropping heavy blobs of it from the burdened pines.

Endersley and the Sitka were heading down to the river on the last lap of the journey. They had driven the dogs early and late since leaving Half-and-Half, for there was much ground to be covered and the Cedar Falls stampede would cut across country through Circle City. Endersley was ahead, breaking trail for the straining dogs. Grand dogs they were, all ten of them, bright-eyed, sharp-fanged, of the best breed in the North. And the best and finest and truest bred of the lot was Sunnygold, pulling leader in the team. She was tawny yellow, a golden-eyed poem of a dog—Endersley's first real gift to June.

Charley was busy in the rear, thrusting his shoulders heftily against the kicking gee-pole, the lash of his whip playing loud in the air, but light along their flanks. Sitka Charley could get twenty-five miles a day out of dogs from which another man couldn't flog ten.

Clouds banked up in the south and an

unaccustomed warmness crept into the atmosphere.

"It's gonna rain, boss!" called Charley.

Endersley didn't reply. With less than twenty miles to go he was inwardly cursing a thermometer that was climbing hand over fist. The damp snow was clinging to the runners and the dogs were floundering in sloppy puddles. The same thought was crossing his own mind—that rain would wash the snow from the trail and without snow the dogs would be useless. They both knew what was happening; a freak wind was setting in from dead south, when by all precedent raging blizzards should be howling down from the northeast.

They were right up over the Circle, and by late afternoon they had but a few miles to go and the trail was getting soggier every minute. With sunset came the rain. It came in squall after squall, lakes and rivers and seas of it falling every hour. It drove down through the valleys and whined along the benches. Cascades tumbled down the mountainsides and rushed in frothy, brown torrents across the flats. It was an interlude, a little spring fallen into late autumn.

"Hell!" said Endersley. "If this don't beat all!"

He gazed at the impassable trail, at the leaking, waterlogged land, at the straining dogs and the heavily-dragging sledge, at the bare, brown patches of earth showing through the slushy snow, and cursed his luck.

"Rain all night, boss," said Charley decisively. "Tomorrow wind go. Tomorrow he snow like hell. Sure!"

Endersley brought the dogs to a standstill. "Not much use going on. Better make camp here," he said. "We are only wearing the dogs out, and I could walk it quicker. You stay here with the outfit. Put me up a bunch of grub and I'll push along. It's only just down there in the valley below the big divides. I'll drive stakes and get back as quick as possible. Rest the dogs up—keep 'em separate and don't let 'em fight. Feed 'em up all they want. We're ahead of the crowd yet and it's up to the dogs to keep us there, when we start back to record."

The Indian hurriedly made camp. While he was putting up the tent Endersley unloaded the sledge and opened up one of the bales.

"Got 'em all with me, old scout," he said. "One for you, one for Ralph, one for old Pierre, and one each for myself and the little girl."

He fished out a great bundle of pine-pegs, twenty-five of them, all with initials cut neatly in the top and at the sides.

Charley looked up and grinned. "Thank you, boss," he said. "If we make through to Circle all square, we'll earn that stake!"

He hoisted his partner's pack and helped him shoulder it, buckling the straps, Indian fashion, under the armpits and across the forehead.

"S'long, partner," said Endersley, slipping a thong through his snowshoes and hanging them round his neck.

"S'long, boss," said Charley. "I have everything ready when you git back."

He watched Endersley swing off through the trees and head down toward the gold valley at the foot of the middle divides.

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Thereafter for an hour he did everything a man could do to ensure a quick getaway and smooth running when the time came. He lightened the load of every single thing bar absolute essentials and jettisoned the rest. He disposed the real necessities in a way that would balance the sledge to perfection. He even doled out the tea and sugar rations to save the time of doing it in the quick rest halts they would have to make on the journey down. He oiled the runners. Then, having tethered each dog down in the sheltering lee of spread timber he grunted and turned in, waiting doggedly sleepless for his partner.

Endersley got down to his location in the pitch darkness of an Alaskan rainstorm. He rigged up a shelter under the dripping bushes and waited for daylight.

Warm gales and hissing rain squalls droned through the long night and never ceased until the freak wind failed from the south. Then the frost began to haul back along its lost miles and the rain changed to sleet and the sleet to tiny snow crystals.

The light came streaking up out of the southeast and showed a country almost denuded of snow, a country over which a sheet of thin ice was slowly forming to the falling mercury.

Upflung summits of mighty divides reared up white-capped and flashing into the dome of the morning, their sides fretted and grooved with the scars of old avalanches long since lost in the rivers at the bottom. Through the narrow valley the riotous waters of the Middle Fork

thundered in a creaming cataract. The whole country was wild, rugged, magnificent in the stark sense of untamable strength.

Endersley scrambled down to the riverbed. Without pausing for food he worked through the short day and long into the darkness of the Arctic night. He unslung his pan and tried out the whole length of the river. Then he felled a tree and crossed the torrent to the opposite bank and worked back again on that side. The vein was heaviest in the dead center of the bearing strata. And he discovered one thing he had missed before. Middle Forks was rich in gold-bearing quartz, as well as carrying the most tremendous collection of "pockets" ever located. He threw pan after pan at the creek side; from north to south along the swirling waters the gold yield grew and grew till he reached the core, exactly in the center of his location. There, and for nearly half a mile round, his tests showed two solid ounces to the pan—a record-breaker!

In spite of himself, Endersley's pulses were racing. The blood was drumming in his temples. He, with old Charley, had done the thing that hundreds of thousands had failed to do—found virgin gold close to water; gold, not in mere paying quantities, but gold in a fabulous deposit that almost surpassed belief. If he hadn't seen and known the miracle fields of Bonanza, El Dorado, Dawson and Stewart, he was almost ready to believe that Middle Forks was a dream, an hallucination set up in his brain to drive him mad. But he knew it was rich and real. In half an hour he traced one great pocket to its end, and a collection of yellow nuggets winked up at him from its bed. Within twenty minutes he had found another. And there were dozens around.

For four days he tried out patch after patch over the whole area, toiling almost ceaselessly at the creekside. He traced the outcrop to its very richest heart and there he drove his stakes. Once the claim was recorded and filed on the books of the gold commissioner down in Circle City no power on earth could wrest it from him.

He gazed at the land that was his, honestly glorying in the knowledge that his name would go down in Klondike history, would be stamped on the annals of the North, as that of one of a bare score of men who could claim for their ground the thrilling title, Discovery Number One.

His find was a fluke, an outcrop of gold forced through by the pressure of some vast subterranean upheaval back in the dawning mists of time. It had "bulged" the true vein which runs east by south from Nome on the Bering Sea sheer across Alaska and on through to Dawson in Canada. And that bulge had been thrust upward to the light in the silent fastnesses of Middle Forks. And Endersley had found it.

Just for a moment something within him exulted in epic strain, then the other stakes fell off his shoulder with a rattle that brought him back to earth. With a

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half-ashamed glance round him he seized his axe and set off. He drove stakes to be for Sitka Charley to the immediate right of his own. June's he drove on his left.

They would be discovery Right and Discovery Left. All the other claims would take running numbers. Thus Norvice's would be entered as Discovery Right No. 2, and Pierre Bonard's Discovery Left No. 2.

Then he wrote out the five claim-papers ready for filing and started back along the trail to his camp, blessing every snowflake that fell. He had made himself, and probably a hundred others, millionaires twice over. In the spring Middle Forks would be on the map.

He had pictured himself spinning a grandly exulting yarn to Charley when he got back, a story that would bring the high lights of excitement leaping into even his imperturbable eyes. But when he got there all that he did was to unload his pack and look at his partner eye to eye.

Charley, without even a grin, said, "All right, boss?"

Endersley answered, "As good as gold, Charley," and in the scintillant gauze of the falling snow he held out his hand.

Then Charley jerked a thumb over his shoulder toward the tent. "Coffee and flapjack an' a pile of moose steaks keepin' hot for you, boss," he said. "You better eat. Had nothin' much sense you ben gone, eh?"

"Darn little," admitted Endersley with a grin.

Charley watched him eat in stolid silence. He put away a mountain of grub and four cans of scalding coffee before he sat back and reached for his tobacco pouch.

"You finish?" asked Charley.

"Couldn't pick another bone!" said Endersley.

"Now, I tell you sumpin'," answered his partner in the voice of one who had waited advisedly until his hearer had fed and rested.

"Go ahead, old warrior."

"Magain is hangin' around!"

"What?"

"An' Coldwater Griff. I got their trail in the woods when I was out after that moose. They lost us in the thaw. Could see where they was drawing circles to git us again."

Endersley was on his feet. "Harness up—quick!" he said. "Leave the tent, we don't want it. Hurry like hell! If they've been quartering the land around they've found my trail back from Middle Forks to here. They'll pull my stakes, as sure as they're alive. I'm going back! You follow on with the dogs. We'll wait for 'em on our own ground. If they've been there first it's going to be one hell of a race to the gold recorders."

It was a stiff bit of ground over the mountain and down into the valley beyond. Endersley made it at the run. He pulled his gun and ran and clawed and climbed by turns.

The fine, falling snow had covered the land with its tiny particles, and a man's trail was good for three or four hours to a tracker. He followed his own trail back, his eyes ranging ahead and seeking for signs of Magain. Halfway over, the marks of other feet swung in to join his—but whereas his were coming away from Discovery Number One, the other four were going toward it. It was the sinister promise of tragedy, told in silent footprints.

Flinging caution to the wide winds, he scrambled down the scarred divide with a recklessness that would have given cold shudders to a mountaineer. He went as fast as hands and feet and a cold brain could carry him.

Far down in the valley he saw a picture that brought all his fighting blood racing to his head. He went drunk with desire for fight.

Across the wide, white sweep of the ground he had staked long lines of footmarks led from corner to corner. They embraced the whole area of the claim and there were trampled halts at the spots where he had driven his center stakes.

He knew what had happened. In his rage he cursed Sitka Charley for having made him waste two hours in a leisurely feed while Magain and Coldwater Griff were getting ahead of them. As he got further down he could see that they had also marked a long stretch of claims to the right and left of the five he had staked. And across the river another string of claims were staked on the opposite bank. All the story was told in the criss-crossing footmarks.

"They're claiming by proxy," he growled under his breath, "for all that crowd of Skagway skunks. That agent will hand them out a cash settlement for the whole

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shooting. They'll be *giving* it away! There's a hundred fortunes inside those stakes, and they're slinging them away on a——"

He choked. There was a red mist before his eyes. He stared speechless at the story in the snow—he had been beaten by Magain after the dance he had led them and the chances he'd taken. The claim-jumpers had won.

The end of the story showed clear in the trail that led away from the claims to the edge of the racing river; it was Magain's trail pulling out for the south. Middle Forks never froze; he knew that if the bullies had had a canoe cached somewhere down there they could get seventy miles start before the light failed—Middle Forks leaps down to the Chandalar at twenty miles an hour.

The trail left by Magain and Griff went on to the edge of the river and then struck away down beside it. Before long Endersley discovered that they, too, had dogs and a sled for packing the necessary supplies. They must have left their outfit by the river before they made the final dash. Even if they had no canoe, they had a fair start, and it would be hard to overtake them.

He was exasperated with himself, realizing as he did that Magain and Coldwater Griff must have lain up in the timber at Half-and-Half and followed him until the unexpected thaw blotted out the trail.

He hurriedly cut new stakes and initialed them. By the time Sitka Charley had landed in with the team he had redriven the whole set. Endersley waited for him at the edge of the river trail.

"Come on, old boy," he said, "let her rip. If you know anything about mushing dogs, know it now!"

Charley leaped into the lead and clicked his tongue at Sunnygold. Endersley gave a shove and away went the team careening down by the river bank, straight into the falling snow, the sledge runners singing on the rocky outcrops in the trail.

"A hundred miles of this, Charley, and we hit the Chandalar River," yelled Endersley.

"Chandalar—he froze! We catch them pigdogs when we hit the Chandalar—you see!" answered the Sitka.

After that there was little said—little to say. There was a big, stiff job ahead of them and they knew it.

Although Griff and Magain were following closely in each other's tracks to avoid giving any more assistance than they could help to anyone behind, the mere fact that the trail had been trodden at all gave the pursuers at least five extra miles a day.

At every opportunity Charley raced the dogs, but there were many bad stretches, cut up by rock and broken country, where a slow crawl was the only progress possible. The going for the man ahead was hard, too, but Endersley realized that they were gaining. Their tracks were getting less and less distinct in the falling snow.

Middle Forks is a river that picks up an unconscionable number of feeders in its journey southward. Once, during the first afternoon, they had to get the whole outfit over seven little tributaries in less than a mile. One of the dogs, Footsack, cracked a shoulder blade and had to be shot; another got tangled up in its own auxilliary dragrope and fell down a crevice high up among the torn divides. Before the faint light of the short Arctic day went out of the sky another was out of the team, a passenger on the sledge with a foot crushed under a slipping boulder.

Magain and Griff were scarcely resting, scarcely stopping at all for sleep. They built no fire and they boiled no tea. They were flying southward as fast as their legs and hard-driven dogs could carry them, hammering the miles behind them on a last desperate effort to get through to Circle City.

Magain and Griff were wanted men on both sides of the boundary and in making for a hub of civilization again they were doing a bold thing. It was their last big chance to make a fortune out of the Endersley strike and they were taking it. Not only could they sell their news and start stampedes, that would ruin any chance the Cedar Falls men had of getting in big on the new bonanza, but with a modicum of luck they might even be able to record every claim they had staked, and then get rid of them, even at bargain prices, before their real identities were discovered. There was every possibility that the Skagway agent might have crossed over to Circle to await news there. If he was in the city they knew he would pay cash down, and big money, too, for every recorded claim he could lay his hands on.

It was a big stake and neither of them spared themselves in the landing of it. They were packing only things they absolutely needed. They ate on the run. It was cold fare for them all the way.

And behind them, Endersley and the Indian clung grimly in their wake, hoping

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to lessen the advantage of their head start. The only ray of hope, so far as Endersley could see, was that the men ahead had not been able to get a canoe. Had they suddenly struck a bunch of wandering Indians and been able to get a canoe from them, then Endersley knew he might just as well have chucked up the chase as a bad job—for the outlaws could have got through to Fort Yukon in less than four days.

By the end of the fourth day they got down out of the high ranges with their killing ridges and miles of high, broken country and the going got a bit easier. The fall of the river was less rapid. The general country was flatter and not so broken up by tumultuous streams that required fording. But the Magains were still making as good time as they. Endersley could only hope their dogs would play out first. His own were well seasoned to the work.

Single prospectors began to pass them flying northward with wild eyes and desperate speed. Some were traveling with a mere blanket and a bale of grub, some with only the bale of grub, and some—the ones whose bones would blaze the trail for the others yet to come—carried nothing at all.

"The swine are selling the news already!" panted Endersley, hooking the sledge runners free from a cluttering rubble of snow-covered boulders. "They'll have half the whole Yukon roaring up north unless we can get up with 'em!"

He raced ahead of the dogs. "Crowd them, Charley! Another forty miles and we'll be through to the river ice!"

They swept southward to the song of singing runner and cracking whip. On the sixth day they hit the Chandalar and swung in with a rush and a roar to a trail on the fast ice. The slow, terribly difficult country to the north was left behind.

From the little settlements along the Chandalar they learned of the progress of Magain. "Hittin' the miles like hell, they are!" they were told. "Buyin' food and eating it on the run. Tryin' to buy dogs, they are, some of theirs is played out, but I guess the Chandalar knows Bully! You'd be surprised how many dogs there *ain't* on this river. But if you're aimin' to catch up with 'em, you'll have to sprint some."

As they swung round the Islands at the upper end of the Yukon Flats they learned that their own roaring pace along the Chandalar was telling its own tale. The Magains were only six hours ahead!

Six hours ahead and a hundred miles to go! Out of the Chandalar and into the wide-flung Yukon they flew. At Fort Yukon Endersley changed three of his dogs that had given out under the strain and bought two others to replace the ones that had died back in the Endicott Ranges.

Hour after hour they maintained their pace, fast and furious, searching the trail ahead for signs of Magain and Griff. And all down the length of the river they left strung out behind them a trail of speculation, wonderment, and argument.

Later by the river they heard the grind and whinny of sledge runners racing into the pall of the Northern night. Outfit after outfit swept by out of sight in the darkness, swinging past on the long clear stretches of the river trail. They passed to the riotous accompaniment of snapping, snuffling dogs, cracking whips, yelling runners and vociferous men.

"That's the first of the stampede," said Endersley. "Cedar Falls boys going up! They'll be on time. But they'll be taking half the river towns with 'em if they keep to the main trail. Maybe they're aiming to cut across country when they're out of the Yukon. Say, Charley, Nell must have got through quick."

Then ahead lay the last lap, a twenty-mile run through to Circle City. Two hours' rest at Burney's House Endersley gave the dogs, and not a minute longer, then the team was under way again.

A cold fear was taking grip on Endersley's heart. He was giving way to the slow conviction that Magain must have either bought or stolen fresh dogs from one of the riverside towns and taken the lead for good.

Charley refused to believe it. He was firmly of the opinion that they had already passed the Magains—left them at a standstill somewhere back there in the night. But Endersley was not so optimistic.

They maintained the killing pace all through the white splendor of the morning, rushing along until the smoke haze of Circle City lifted ahead, five miles further on around a desolate bend of the river.

And it was then that the thing happened. Abruptly, and without a shadow of warning, a rifle shot cracked out of the timber on the near side bank. The shock of it seemed to split the air and the wheel-dog somersaulted in its harness and hung in

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the drags. Another shot and then another rang out and two more dogs were twitching in the packed snow of the trail.

Endersley grabbed his gun and raced across the snow, heading for the spot on the bank whence the bullets had come, while Charley struggled to get some sort of order out of the chaos the dogs were in. Three more of them pitched over in the snow, one of them dying with another's leg still fast in its jaws.

The Sitka swore below his breath and ran in a jerky, zigzag toward the bank, unslinging his rifle as he went. Endersley had already disappeared in the wooded rise of the bank and Charley headed in after him.

No sooner had he disappeared than Coldwater Griff slid out from behind a great ice hummock at the side of the trail and ran to the dogs. He cut two of them loose, Sunnygold and Figurehead, with great slashing strokes of a bowie, and dragged them back to the ice hummock.

Magain, crouching low and running at top speed, came down from the bank and joined him. Behind the high hummock their own team was tethered, four hard-driven Malamutes, showing the abuse to which they had been subjected. Sunnygold and Figurehead were harnessed at the head of them and with savage kicks and blows from the butt of the whip, the team pulled out.

Endersley and the Indian burst out of the timber just in time to see the team swing round the bend of the river.

For a moment Endersley could scarcely believe his eyes. The whole thing, from start to finish, had happened in such a bewilderingly short time that he could hardly realize that Griff and Magain were away down trail on the last five miles, leaving him stranded like a blown cinder on the trail side.

Then with a half-strangled snarl he started forward.

"Run, Charley! Run!" he yelled. "Run like blazes! We may be able to get a shot at 'em round the bend!"

They leaped forward and rushed up the trail, but Magain was racing those dogs as they had never been raced before, and in less than ten minutes he was more than half a mile ahead, crouching low on the flying sledge, pouring in whip.

Endersley could hear Sunnygold's exasperated remonstrances, and the sound of it added to his fury. He raced ahead with the blood drumming in his temples.

XIV

ON THE outskirts of Circle City June Royal stood and waited for her lover. She had taken up a position on the high bank above the trail, a position that gave her a clear view up river for a good mile. For two days she had waited there, in the sheltering lee of a copse of alders, waiting for the first sight of Bob to come swinging round the bend of the river at the side of his racing dogs.

As the team she recognized shot into view she waved her handkerchief madly and shouted and danced about excitedly in the snow.

But there came no answering hail from the men with the sledge, no cheery halloo or rollicking greeting.

She saw them plying the whip and her brow puckered in perplexity. Bob never used a whip with such mercilessness as that. And certainly it was not Bob's way to flog his dogs and ride the runners, too, as these men were doing.

But that was Sunnygold in the lead. She recognized her in an instant; recognized her by the eager thrusting pull of her stride and her tawny gold coat.

Then she gasped. There was blood all over Sunnygold; she was in pitiful distress. She, who had given of her valiant best all through that long killing run down from the Endicotts.

June stared in horror as the sledge careened toward her. Then, under the close-tied parkas, she saw the faces of the men on the sledge. Not Bob Endersley and the Sitka Indian, but Bully Magain and Coldwater Griff.

In a flash the sinister truth burst upon her. Then at the bend of the river she saw two more figures, black figures that ran and stumbled and ran again as though paced to utter exhaustion.

The sledge was almost up to her. For one horrific second she looked at Magain, then, raising her voice, she cried, "Sunnygold! Here, old girl, I want you Sunnygold!"

Sunnygold's ears flicked at the first syllable of that remembered voice, and her golden body flashed from the trail as she obeyed.

It is doubtful if Griff and Magain ever

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quite knew just what it was that happened to them at the milepost outside Circle City, but when Sunnygold leaped from the trail, the other dogs were unable to keep their line. They came to a sudden, tangled up standstill and the rushing sledge overran them. It turned completely over, pitching the two ruffians headlong, and the shock of their impetus forced them deep into the snow, their great booted feet kicking about helplessly in the air. Half-strangled oaths and howling blasphemies sounded from the snow as the two bullies struggled to free themselves.

June ran swiftly down the bank and got behind them. One after the other she took possession of their firearms, lifting them neatly from their holsters and pitching them up among the alders above the trail.

With the snick of a knife she cut Sunnygold free and waited for the bullies to get their faces out of the snow. Magain was first to rescue himself from his ignominious position and as soon as his bewildered eyes saw the laughing face of the girl, his hand went down with a rabid curse for his gun.

"Nothing doing, Bully," she smiled, and covered them with her own automatic. They knew she could use it and the two of them sat and glared at the girl while she waited for Endersley to catch up.

And Endersley caught up. The terrific strain of the trail showed in every movement he made, but every thought of fatigue, every thought, even, of the strike behind them in the fastnesses, seemed to leave him when he caught sight of Magain.

Bully had taken off his snowshoes, and was standing up again when a bone-hard fist landed full on his teeth. Before he could get his balance, Endersley was on him, crashing in a volley of lefts and rights that clicked on his jaws in the silence of the morning.

Magain tucked his head down, covered up and charged forward, rumbling in his throat like a maddened bull. He looked mountainous and enormous, imbued with all the crush-weight strength of a bear. Endersley gave ground as he came and shot in an uppercut that took him clean underneath the chin and sent him spinning down into the snow.

Magain rolled up to his knees and glared at him.

"Jest a minute, my bantam cock, while I get peeled," he growled. "I'll have pleasure in knockin' the breakfast out of you, minus my coat."

The two of them stripped themselves of their parkas and furs and stood up to each other and fought. Out on the frozen river, within sight of the gold recorder's, with the entire population of Circle City rushing up the trail to witness it, they fought. They battered it out man to man in the hard-trampled snow of the trail-side, with the girl up under the alders covering them with a gun.

And when the Circle City crowd got up to them they found not two, but four men fighting like demented cats out there in the white silence. Sitka Charley was settling a little account of his own with Coldwater Griff.

A roar went up from the crowd when they saw Magain using his elbows and they howled again when he sent Endersley sprawling on his back with a swinging butt from his bullet head.

"Hey, you, big 'un!" a ferocious little copper miner of about five foot nothing yelled at him. "You fight fair, y'ugly lump, or there'll be a bunch of us takin' sides, and it won't be yours!"

But Endersley was up again and he whaled in with cold fury at the bully.

"You jumped my claim, you swine!" he muttered and slammed in a right that closed Magain's left eye. Twice Magain got home with terrific body blows that shook Endersley to the hair and three times he countered with the right just a little too high on Endersley's jaw. He rushed in to settle the matter, but Endersley sent his head cracking back as though it had been hit by a kicking moose, and then played on the puffed eye. "Hand me the change out of this!" he growled. He whanged in with a right-handed hit that flattened Magain's nose and toppled him over backward.

Endersley half tripped in the caking snow and Magain, again on his feet, saw his chance. He swung a right-hand punch at him with every ounce of his great body power behind it. June Royal gasped. Endersley was completely open and off his balance.

But the blow never landed. At least, not on Endersley. It took Coldwater Griff on the jaw with a shock that sent him spin-

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ning and staggering drunkenly before he pitched over with a crash in the snow, down and out. Charley, with a hard slogging left, had quite unconsciously poked Griff's head sheer into the line of Magain's sledgehammer.

Endersley got his balance again and gave ground before Magain's attack. They clinched and swayed for a time, getting their breath back, and, breaking out of that clinch, Endersley saw as fine an opening as he had ever had—a half-dropped guard and the weight of the body mostly on the wrong foot. He stepped in with a jump and slugged in a beautifully timed right hander full and flush on the point of the bully's jaw. Magain dropped where he stood, as insensible to his defeat as to the catcalls of Circle City.

Endersley sat down on the overturned sledge and wiped his forehead.

"Sir," said a voice just above him, "I'm pleased to meet you. My name is Livesey. I'm sheriff here. It cost me four fights like yours just now to get the job. It costs me one a month to hold it down. I repeat, I'm pleased to meet you. How do?"

"A bit sore, Sheriff. And I'm pleased to meet you, too. If——"

"I'm also Mineral Recorder here. I'm told you need to see me—you have just been way up in the Endicotts unearthin' ten-mile slabs of gold. I'll be glad to—I'm sorry, miss!"

He broke off his speech to step aside. June was on her knees in front of Endersley with snow-water and a dab of liniment.

"I'll see you in the office, sir," he concluded from a distance. "You've skinned out half Circle City. They've gone whoopin' up the Yukon, cuttin' claim stakes as they went."

June, with a hint of tears in her eyes, busied herself with her first aid work till Endersley, with a laugh and a kiss, stood up and took her by the arm toward the sheriff.

Their entry into Circle City was a triumphal procession. They rode in on the sheriff's sledge, behind the sheriff's team, with Sunnygold following dutifully along. They rode right in through the main street and up to the offices of the gold commissioner. And there they were met by friends.

"Bless my soul!" cried Bob delightedly. "Look who's here! Pierre! Well, this *is* great. Well, sir, I am pleased to see you again!"

The old missionary smiled a beatific smile and looked almost self-conscious.

"Hello, Bob! How are you, Bob?" called a voice. "Everything turn out all right up above? Have a good run down on the ice? How'd the dogs keep? Have any rain? Ain't the gal lookin' fine? Heard any about that Magain crowd? Norvice landed in yesterday night like an aggravated bolt of lightnin'. He's around lookin' for 'em through the backsight of a gun!" Nanayak came bustling up, making his coming known a hundred yards away.

And then there were Nell and Josh Henderson and all the whole crowd of them shaking hands all round.

"Billy Masterson's gone up for us," they explained. "The crowd of us got together and drew lots for it. Bill lost. He chose his team from every husky in Cedar Falls. You never saw such a string of dogs as he's mushin'. He'll beat the crowd. Josh Henderson gave him six hours' start. We're all waiting for him here. Say, Bob, when's the weddin'?"

"Just as soon as you old toughs can leave off making a fuss over my girl. Where's Pierre? Oh, here you are. A word in your ear, sir."

He dragged himself away from the crowd and went over to the missionary.

"Pierre," he said with a happy grin, "did you bring along that little matter I—er—I asked Nell if——"

The old man's face broke into a wreath of wrinkles.

"My son, I would rather have stayed away altogether than have forgotten so delightful a trust," he said. "I should like to have married you two young children in Cedar Falls, in the little township where you first met, where little June slaved to pull you back to life when your spirit was almost fled." He sighed. "Ah! but young folk are too impatient these days," he said with a whimsical smile. "Yes, Nell brought me your message. And I have brought something you will need when the time comes."

Endersley laughed back at the missionary. "Something made from one of my own nuggets, Pierre?" he whispered, and Pierre Bonard nodded. Endersley had

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given him a little nugget from his own first diggings to have made into a wedding ring in Dawson.

The young gold hunter took the ring and then looked soberly at the old missionary.

"What are you going to do now that all your flock has deserted you?" he asked quietly.

Bonard shrugged. "What can I do? I must go up with them. The flock has never yet come to the church, my son; the church must always go to the flock. In a week or two the Endersley Strike will no longer be a rumor. It will be the center of a city that will stand badly in need of a minister of God. And what do you think the boys have decided to call that city?"

"Haven't the faintest idea."

"Royal! Just plain Royal! Isn't that a grand name for a new gold city, my son?"

"Do you hear that, June girl? As soon as you lose that sweet name of yours to me, you will find it again up there in the Endicotts. And listen, dearest. Pierre says he's going to follow his crowd of bad eggs right up to where they're going. What can we do about that?"

June drew the splendid old man to one side. "Pierre, you old darling," she whispered. "Bob has brought you back a present. You'll hurt us very much if you don't accept it—really. Up there at the end of the trail you will have to build yourself a new mission, a new home and you'll have all sorts of very big expenses to meet. You'll need a lot of money if you are to get the church established right up there." She slipped the claim paper into his hand. "You can do ever so much good with that up there, can't you?" she said encouragingly.

Bonard gazed down at his hands, staring like a man bereft, at the claim rights of Discovery Left Number 2.

And then Norvice came in. Straight and direct down the trail he came, resolute and grim. And ahead of him, shuffling sullenly at the behest of his great gleaming Colt, marched Coldwater Griff and Bully Magain.

Circle City cheered and made way for the small procession. He marched them right up the main street, up to the door of the sheriff's office and pushed them through.

Joshua Livesey looked up without a spark of surprise as the trio clattered in. He rose.

"Mr. Norvice, sir," he announced with dignity, "I'm pleased to meet you. I heard you were coming. And I've also heard from citizens of Cedar Falls passing through, certain other facts in connection with you and Magain. I'm glad to know you have succeeded in your pledge. I once had to do something like that in order to get this job as sheriff and I have to do it about once a month in order to hold my job. I've got the handcuffs all handy."

Norvice saluted the sheriff, and handed his charges over.

"There is a reward out for these two beauties," observed the sheriff. "I notice you are no longer in the uniform of that much respected force, the Northwest Mounted. Therefore you are entitled to said reward; it is in the neighborhood of ten thousand dollars. I will make application for same on your behalf immediately." Then turning his head, he roared out, "Bill!"

Bill appeared, a great hefty giant of a man with a cast in his eye.

"See to them two hoodlums!" said the sheriff.

And Bill saw to them. He handcuffed them and lugged them away to the city jail, which was a stout built outhouse behind the sheriff's office.

Norvice saw the pair of them under lock and key and then he went back to the sheriff.

"Say, Sheriff," he said, "that was damn good of you to call your men off when you heard I was chasing those two stiffs."

"Well?" said the sheriff, without glancing up from a file of mining licenses.

"Your men could have nabbed them as easy as I did."

"You've said it."

"Well, I never corralled those two stiffs."

"You sure didn't, boy."

"You collared 'em yourself."

"I sure did. And as such I will make out application for said reward on my own behalf. Mr. Norvice, sir, I'm pleased to know you. I will either hold these prisoners on American warrants till extradition orders come through, or send them down to headquarters to be summarily dealt with on this side, according to orders.

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In any case, there is murder on both their sheets."

Norvice went out and ran into Endersley and June.

"Hello, Ralph, old man, done the job at last?" said Bob shaking hands warmly.

"I have."

"And is it back to the Scarlet and Blue now? They'll never know at headquarters that you were anywhere near the border—after you've explained your absence."

Norvice looked at him quizzically, and put his arm around Nell's waist. "And I am going to have to adjust another matter, too," he said. "Just as soon as you've finished your business with the Circle City Church," he informed him, "I should like a short loan of it."

"Why not fix it up together?"

"May we?"

"Nothing else will do. But say, I want a wedding present, Ralph!"

"Anything I've got—except a job! I am not quite sure of my own, just now."

"That Government proclamation. June and I want to frame it in a frame of our own gold. Not asking too much, am I?"

"Take it, old scout." Norvice fished it out of his breast pocket and handed it over to Endersley, the scorched paper with the bullet holes through the eyes of Griff and Magain.

Endersley caught him by the wrist and put his mouth right up against Norvice's ear. "What's coming to those two blighters?" he whispered.

"Death! Sure as fate," said Norvice with cold assurance.

And Endersley nodded, glad and relieved in his inmost soul that June would never find that lost brother of hers.

He held out a slip of paper to Ralph Norvice.

"Here, Sergeant. Here's a present from us," he said.

"My stars," gasped Norvice and, as a man of the Mounted would, jumped into the gold recorder's at a bound.

Endersley and June, laughing gaily and arm in arm, followed him in. The recorder opened the register wide and laid it out before them.

"This is one great day," he said.

"Bigger than that," answered Bob and the hand that was round June's shoulder caressed the soft skin of her cheek.

Endersley and June signed the register and then signed again on the identification and license ledgers. The recorder filed their claims, stamped and handed them their mining licenses.

"And that," said Endersley, putting down the pen, "is the end of a man-sized run."

The return of Cleek, the man of Forty Faces, the Amateur Cracksman, who is pledged to aid the forces of Scotland Yard until the crimes of his former life are expiated! Here he meets one of the greatest mysteries of his career in

THE RIDDLE OF THE AMBER SHIP

by

Mary E. and Thomas W. Hanshew

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THAT WHICH HAPPENS

By J. ALLAN DUNN

Author of "South!" "The Last Potlatch," etc.

"THAT WHICH HAPPENS" IS NOT ALWAYS LOGICAL, NOT ALWAYS EXPECTED, BUT STRANGE THINGS DO HAPPEN—ESPECIALLY TO THOSE WHO SEEK ADVENTURE IN THE FAR PLACES OF THE EARTH

JOHN BROOKS, having sufficient money, no especial bent or training for trade or profession, no present entanglement with the opposite sex, found himself quickened by the age-old instinct; the desire to seek My Lady Adventure, to make the world his oyster.

He wanted to open that oyster and he had a hunch, the superstition of red-blooded youth, that he would find a pearl within the shells.

The gradual realization that the ports of the seven seas may be swiftly classified under a few main and universal characteristics; the discovery that the modern tourist is ubiquitous and that the tours of steamship companies extend to the remotest harbors, found John Brooks bidding a somewhat bored farewell to Singapore and taking passage on the monthly steamer to Sourabaya—with a pronouncing phrase-book and dictionary of the Malayan language in his cabin grip. Once aboard, he listened to talk of all the Dutch East Indies, tried to study Malay in the pricky, sticky heat when he was not trying to sleep, but the bright face of Adventure seemed as low beneath the horizon as an Alaskan sunrise.

Sourabaya, while prosperous, turned out to be dirty and ugly, jammed with Chinese and Javanese, Arabs and Europeans, coolies, merchants, citizens and soldiers. The dwellings were set close in cosmopolitan, but unpleasant fashion, without segregation into quarters; a tumbledown Chinese hovel next to the private residence of a Dutch magnate. The rooms at the hotel were small, the accommodations overcrowded, the dining-room a pandemonium that smelled of curry, and buzzed with talk—talk—talk. The recommended excursions to extinct craters did not excite him, nobody put him up at the club, which made no difference, since he spoke no Dutch, and didn't want to. The only other amusement was a bi-weekly military concert at the City Gardens.

John Brooks flung his latest guide book deliberately into the wastebasket of the writing-room of the Simpang Hotel, and strolled into the bar for a delectable punch compounded of fresh crushed tamarinds, limes, charged water and rum. At the bar, his foot feeling for a rail that was not there, sniffing a cheroot dubiously and pinching it close to an ear tufted inside and out with grizzly hair; long, lank and a little languid, though the lean face looked shrewd and the gray-blue eyes above the

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angular nose were decidedly alive; clad in rumpled white Russian line, white socks, white shoes, white topee helmet with a green lining; stood an American!

The tall man saw Brooks in the mirror without turning, melancholy on his features. At the order for the punch he straightened, his face shining suddenly as a brushed shoe, long arm extended, lean fingers gripping those of Brooks.

"U. S. A., and a Yank at that!" he cried. "Son, put it there. I'm from Maine myself. Name of Hussey, Samuel Folger Hussey. I'm bettin' you're east of the Hudson yourself. This drink's on me. Don't dispute it. You're a tourist, I take it. I have to live in the damned place. I'm the host. John, if you put too much grenadine into it I'll ruin your Dutch disposition. Try a cheroot, Mr.——?"

"I didn't speak to you at first, Mr. Brooks," he went on after he had got the name, "because I thought first you were a Britisher. They're all right—I fought alongside of 'em—but they're not Americans.

"You'll have lunch with me? You're stayin' here?"

"Leaving," said Brooks, "just as soon as God permits."

"Hell! I knew it! I don't blame you. But we'll sit at the same table. I've got some good Scotch. I'm with the Standard Oil Company. I'm a missionary. I mean it. We're civilizin' the wilds of the South Pacific an' the China Sea; *ladrones* and pirates, head-hunters and man-eaters —and we're doin' it with gas-o-line. I take it you ain't in business?"

Brooks told him what he was looking for, and added that he had so far failed to find it.

"That's because you've taken the long trail to find it when it might be waitin' in the lobby for you back home," said Hussey. "I've met up with some of it, but I've found Adventure usually finds the man, though you can always hunt trouble, and find it.

"Why don't you take a trip in one of the tradin' tramps that go up to Celebes and through the Moluccas? They're apt to be a bit smelly and they're mostly Dutch—outside their engineers who are Scotch and mostly drunk—but they stop everywhere, and you'd be ashore a lot of the time. Sometimes they run into pirates up in the Spermunde Archipelago. The natives always have been pirates there, and it's hard to get out of the system. Up above Macassar they're independent states, confederate they call 'em, petty kingdoms that fly the Dutch flag, but that's about all. Get in with some of those rajahs and kings and they'll show you a good time. I made one trip in one of our tankers and it suited me first rate. I'm due for another in a few days. I'd take you with me, but it's dead against the rules and regulations. Rich, those rajahs. Gold dust and pearls. Queens ain't so bad either.

"It's all interestin', especially when you see it for the first time. The natives ain't like the Javanese coolies. Claim to be Mohammedans, got their mosques up all over the shop, but what most of 'em know about the Koran is nothing. Most of 'em got noses like they belong to one of the lost tribes. Good riders— horseback, ropin' deer. Great sailors. Gals, small but spry."

"What makes up the smelly cargoes?" asked Brooks, who most certainly was far from interested in native women.

"Cargoes?" The other ran off a list of names. "*Trepang,* mother-o'-pearl, bird skins, copra, cloves, nutmegs, tortoises, speckled hardwoods out of the forests, *rattan, dammar* resin, beeswax, *getah* and——"

Names like that had always intrigued Brooks, aroused his imagination. And Sourabaya was a washout.

"They sound interesting," he said. "What's the chance of getting passage on a trading vessel?"

"A cinch. The purser'll be tickled at the chance to make the extra money. He'll ship you on as his clerk—for form's sake, —but you won't have any duties. Go easy on stuff that ain't cooked. Be sure you don't let one of those Celebes Malays slice your head off. And, if you run into any adventure, I'll bet you there's a woman at the bottom of it," said Hussey, dipping his beak into the second punch that Brooks had ordered.

"You're the only American I've seen since I left Singapore," Brooks mentioned at lunch.

"You're out of luck," answered Hussey. "There was one here last week, left on the fortnightly steamer for Celebes day before yesterday. Bound for Macassar. Going

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to be a governess to some rajah's family. An American. A girl from God's country who ought to be back there instead of stewing out here teachin' A B C's to Mohammedan piccaninnies." He spoke with feeling, and Brooks looked at him curiously.

"She was a real girl," said Hussey. "I didn't see an awful lot of her, but that wasn't my fault. Anne Noxon, her name was. She'd come out with a widow who was tourin' the Orient with her young daughter, cruisin' in search of Number Two, so fur's I could make out. Anyway, the kid got sick and died. The widow keeps Miss Noxon as companion till she meets a man that suits her; baits, strikes, hooks and lands him. No more use for Anne Noxon. Gives her a month's salary in Singapore and leaves on a honeymoon. Then the girl gets sick, and away goes the money. You don't get on your feet again in a rush in this climate—'specially a woman. So she's broke, or close to it. Somebody or other offers her this job. I think she saw it advertised. And she gets it, trailin' out here by her lonesome, plucky and pretty as you make 'em. I'll bet my last month's expense account she ain't a month over twenty-two."

"You don't know where she came from?"

Hussey looked at him quizzically.

Brooks explained. "I knew an Anne Noxon. Met her when I was a senior at college. She came from Stockbridge. The name isn't unusual."

"It's a darned pretty one. She didn't happen to mention, but I wouldn't wonder but what she was Massachusetts, at that. Reminded me of the gardens back home—hollyhocks and the pansies, always cheerful and smilin' at you. Too young for a grizzletop like me, too sweet for a sinful old shellback like Sam Hussey," he said, grinning as if to disqualify any suggestion that he was sentimental, "but I'm goin' to try and look her up, just the same, on my next trip."

CELEBES proved promising from Brooks's first sight of it on the second morning out from Sourabaya. The eight-knot, dilapidated tramper limped through a sea that was as smooth as a river. The early morning was golden with amethyst streaks upon the water, violet shadows on the wooded hills.

Then came Macassar, with ships in the roadstead and along the quay white buildings, before which were piled the spicy cargoes in their matting bales. The native *campongs* stretched for miles along the shore, the toy houses swaying on their pole foundations beneath the plumage of the palms. *Proas* with upturned stems and sterns, crescent shaped, their slender wings folded, were drawn up on the beach, others sliding out to the Spermunde Islands or landing with early catches, arrival and departure announced by the clear, monotonous beat of drums. Fishermen, naked but for narrow loincloths, stood high on their bamboo scaffoldings, watching the shoal fish, their nets gathered ready for a cast.

Everywhere along the waterfront merchandise was for sale in the low *tokos*. Straight and narrow streets were lined with houses in the Old Dutch style—big window sashes with tiny panes of glass and sills painted grass green; divided doors with crudely carven fanlights above, galleries fronting on the street and supported by slender wooden columns.

Out of the trading bustle there was privacy everywhere. Gardens and grounds were hidden by high walls, lime-whitened, green boughs showing above. Atop the walls were mantles of flowering creeper rich yellow, magenta, creamy white, pungent with perfume. No easy matter for Hussey to look up Anne Noxon, thought Brooks, remembering the name for the first time. He wondered if it could be the same girl who had come to his college and

danced at the frat house. A quiet, starry-eyed, slim girl in white, whom he had liked because she danced so lightly and didn't want to talk. Not likely.

A spacious square, emerald turfed, was set about on three sides with the stone buildings of the government, the hotel, club, post office, governor's palace and Prins Hendrik's Church. From the fourth side there was a view of the ancient fort, the gleaming gables of the barracks and the small church of the garrison, gay with green blinds beneath its tilting roof, peeping over high rocky ramparts.

As Brooks strolled under the great tamarinds on the high path, he passed native women with orange-colored *sarongs* wound

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tightly about their symmetrical bodies, their dark, soft eyes never dull from disuse. Men with beaked noses, with high turbans, proud and valiant of appearance, scarlet cloths worn high and wide about the waist and high above the knee, walked by with stately port.

It seemed to him as if here were assembled all the characters, all the color for dramatic action, but that the play was not even in rehearsal. Here were men who seemed brave and ambitious, women sprightly and pleasing. They were rated passionate, jealous and extremely revengeful. Yet the chief attributes of Macassar, as he saw it, were peace and plenty, bustle and friendliness. Adventure was still below the horizon. Yet, as he went aboard the scaly, grimy tramper, for the first time in many weeks he felt a recrudescence of the old hunch that something was going to happen. In Celebes.

THE officers of the trading tramp were phlegmatic Dutchmen. They did not address to Brooks more than a dozen words of broken English a day, including the purser, whose brief interest in him had promptly waned when he had been paid the passage money for the round trip—destinations and duration uncertain. The chief engineer was, as Hussey had foretold, a Scot, an expatriated ancient with a bad liver and a morose disposition. He had his meals served separately and, outside of his engine-room, was seemingly speechless. His assistant was Dutch, sallow as tallow, with the grime of his trade ever in the creases of his neck and backing his broken fingernails. There was a sort of second assistant, so far as Brooks could understand the rating, a man with the surly look of a discredited, broken pugilist. His nose was flattened, his ears puffed and crimped, and red-rimmed, ferocious eyes glared defiantly from under the boney penthouse of his low brow. His hair was reddish and straggling and his mouth hard. On his visits on deck for air he appeared in dungarees, sloppily belted, a torn and dirty shirt exposing arms and body that seemed unhealthily white from never having had a chance to get tanned, stringy muscles and outstanding veins amid the apish hairiness of chest and forearms.

He spent his spare time leaning with folded arms on the rail, puffing a charred briar, gazing at all things with the same unflinching enmity, whether it was the shore canoes and their friendly merchants, a Malayan woman strolling, hand on hip, his chief, Brooks, or the Malay oilers and stokers, who were in mortal fear of him.

"A tough bird, that," Brooks told himself, more than once. He speculated a little as to his nationality, never hearing him speak anything but barked orders in Malay that seemed to threaten worse than bites if they were not obeyed on the jump—which they invariably were.

Then, one morning, this third, or second assistant—Brooks fancied he was not much better than a well qualified fireman, given rank for prestige over the Malay firehold crew—came and folded his arms on the rail within fifteen feet of the sole passenger, watching with cruel eyes the frantic efforts of some flying-fish to escape a ravening school of dolphin.

On the upper arm, nearer to Brooks, half-hidden by a smear of grease, was a tattooed flag in faded blue and red, the skin serving for the white field of the stars and stripes. The man was an American. Brooks felt a sudden surge of fellowship, even with such a doubtful citizen.

Through the labyrinth of reefs and islets of the Spermunde Archipelago, graveyard of a thousand ships, the smelly *Bromo* plugged a languid course. The food was indifferent, there were occasional beetles in the rice and copra bugs in the biscuits; there were scores of cockroaches in his cabin, stinking, shining brutes who ran up the walls or sat on the edges of his bunk, wiggling long antennae at him. Killed with a shoe, they scrunched unpleasantly and smelled worse—far worse. Yet Brooks enjoyed himself. That hunch, that feel of something imminently about to happen, was in the air; the world by land and sea, was strange and beautiful.

The water was like the outspread tail of a peacock with the varying depths and over living coral, sand and marine growths. Metallic blues and greens and browns and purples, pools of jade, of olivine, the whole

wondrous pattern wiped out in an instant by the flaws of a passing breeze and reappearing in a new design as his viewpoint shifted. Toy houses on stilts, shaded by

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cocopalm and flaunting banana, leisurely women waving from porches, little *proas* sailing, canoes being paddled—if this was the resort of pirates, they had a pleasant rendezvous. The sky was melted sapphire; the mainland, velvety, verdant, rising up to peaks misty at dawn and twilight, but clear and crisp at noon. The soft air was musky with the spice of nutmeg, clove and cinnamon.

The immediate coast was harsh, forbidding, but fantastic, as if arranged for deliberate contrast. Rocks jutted out in water-carven masses, arched and spired like half-submerged cathedrals, rough promontories chafed the gentle water into foam. High on a ledge, black, menacing, ribbed like the gutted skeleton of a sea monster, the bows of an ill-fated steamer showed above high tide, stripped of everything that could be carried away, looking like a tattered hide.

The *Bromo*—Brooks found out from the grumpy chief engineer that she was named after an extinct volcano not far from Sourabaya and not for any drugstore product—passed the last of the islands at noon.

The chief had a cheroot in his mouth from which he had just pulled the center straw. Then he sought for matches and found none. Brooks supplied the need and got a grunt. But he was persistent—and a little lonely.

"Wonderful group of islands we've just passed," he said. MacCreagh—Brooks had seen the name on a battered trunk and knew it could apply to no other—MacCreagh cast a jaundiced glance at him, breathed out a mingling of burned tobacco and strong Scotch whisky.

"Aye," he said. "They'll be braw to them that sees them for the first time, no doubt. But the deils that dwell there ha' slit many an honest sailor's throat, and would again if they had the chance and saw good sign of loot."

"The Dutch Government claims to have suppressed all piracy," Brooks tried to draw his badger.

"The Dutch Government! Hoot! They may scrape the seashore, here an' there. But as for the islands—and as for the hills? Well, laddie, a man may think he owns a menagerie, but he's careful not to go behind the bars."

Brooks broke the silence by asking about the name of the boat.

"The auld rattletrap makes more headaches than she cures," said MacCreagh. "She's an ill-designed, ill-found, scaly tea-kettle with a set of miscalled engines to which there's not so much left of the original as a second hand gasket. And me with a second who's not the mechanical ability to repair a child's bicycle."

"How about the third?"

"That scum of the world! He's but one credit to his name. He can fight like hell. Man, but he's a bonny fighter! I've seen him——"

There was a blue spark in the eyes of the chief that told of an enthusiasm not yet incinerated by liquor. But the sallow second appeared with what was evidently a tale of woe, and he went below.

He's halfway human, after all, Brooks decided concerning MacCreagh, and fell to wondering what sort of a fight it had been with the tattooed assistant battling so as to merit the chief's encomium. Was it wharf-head row, shanty scrap or a mutiny of the firehold Malays? Such things happened in these peaceful seas, after all.

Yet he could not divest himself of the feeling that this colorful background, the cheery folk with the *sarongs* and turbans, their stilted houses under the waving palms, were but part of a light opera. MacCreagh, with his jaded years heavy upon him, to whom the islands were but menaces to navigation, had shaken the illusion a little. It was as if someone had slid aside a painted canvas that framed a sliding panel and Brooks had glimpsed shadows moving vaguely, mystic figures, a hint of the future—of *that which happens.*

The hunch was working, yeasting in his blood that was beginning to tingle with strange and unfounded anticipation.

Paré-Paré! Roseate hills of ruby-tinted soil close set with jungle growth embracing a bay as blue as the purest ultramarine; a beach of silvery white sand, fringed with a crescent tasseling of coconut palms almost crude in their vivid color. *Campong* villages spotted the bay, houses on posts with high carved gables, windows barred with bamboo, split-bamboo paneling the exterior above the matting walls. Over the *campongs* the red, white and blue of the Dutch flag unfolded negligently.

Sampans, narrow as shuttles, shore canoes, and one or two sailing *proas* came swiftly off to meet the ship. The chief of the *campongs,* receiver of *bakshish* and granter of privilege as official representative of the rajah, paddled off with his son and followers. He was gorgeous in a shirt of spotted yellow silk and a lilac turban of prodigious height. He it is who gives the gracious permission of the rajah

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for the freedom of the port, and presently he emerged from the skipper's cabin with a crisp bill of the Bank of Java tucked under his *sarong* and a breath hardly to be expected on an orthodox Mohammedan.

Then the *Bromo* was boarded by a horde of natives, climbing nimbly up rope ladders like so many trained, chattering apes, naked save for bright *sarongs* and white or saffron turbans. Every man squatted to display his wares on plaited mats of vividly colored withes, in bags of matting and small baskets of green palm fronds, or in boxes of polished hardwood trimmed with brass.

These were petty peddlers, the rarest of their possessions baroque pearls of little value. The business of the ship was with the Arab, Chinese and Malay traders who held their merchandise stored for the purser—now a personage overshadowing the skipper—to bargain over and order delivered.

Brooks got out of the pompous officer the grudging information that the *Bromo* would stay certainly until nightfall, probably leave about midnight and might remain until the following morning. So he paid a silver *kwartgulden,* of the approximate value of a dime, to a *sampan* owner and went ashore.

At first the natives regarded him with kind and friendly faces as he strolled along the shore but, as he stopped at the shack of a Chinaman and bought some ripe mangoes and rice cakes, he thought he noticed a subtle difference in the humor of the crowd. He fancied that he was being viewed with a slight and tolerant suspicion. Without doubt he was a special object of interest. Children peered at him and dodged back, women leaned over bamboo railings or came to their barred windows as he passed. Somehow the blades of the knives and the spears, from being merely picturesque, took on a slight menace. The looks were not definitely hostile, but he began to get a pricking in his thumbs, a sense of excitation.

He saw the big, shambling figure of the assistant engineer with the tattooed flag upon his arm, go down the beach, clad in white slops, hatless and shoeless, disappearing into a bamboo shanty without following or comment. It was curious. After a while it seemed to wear off as Brooks took some snapshots, and his departure from the busy beach toward the shady hills was apparently unnoticed.

He followed a well defined path, aimlessly, seeking shadow and a breeze rather than any more definite purpose than ultimately to reach a point from which he might view the bay. He met no one. Great butterflies drifted by, he heard the distant and weird cries of apes, once a peacock rocketed past to drift down into a thicket of bamboo. It was very still in the forest. The busy murmur that had followed him up from the beach had died away, stifled by the thickening screen of trees. Still and hot; small beads of perspiration broke out all over him, streaming down as he hunted for a spot where the sea-wind might fan through. Once he distinctly heard the tinkling of bells and a high-pitched voice that stopped abruptly.

It was *siesta* hour, he realized. Except for the presence of the *Bromo,* all activities would be suspended. He did not feel drowsy, despite the heaviness of the air that seemed charged with a blend of camphor, cloves, mace, nutmeg and overripe fruit. Quite suddenly the path widened to a clearing on a small plateau where the tops of the trees were waving.

There was a central building walled with broad planks of some dark, native wood, with a high-pitched roof, big windows on what appeared at first as a second story, but proved to be the only floor raised on rounded, carven pillars that were gaily painted. Galleries and covered stairways led to outer courts where smaller houses stood backed to a stockade of bamboo.

There was an open gate in the front wall of the main compound. Flowers and shrubs drooped motionless, unaffected by the breeze that reached only the treetops. Here and there were clumps of fruit trees. Steaming out from the picturesque place came a rank odor that proclaimed primitive ideas of sanitation, suggested cholera. There was no one visible at first, then Brooks saw men lying in the shade, arms flung over their faces or doubled beneath their heads. These were under the floor of the big house, spears slanted against the columns.

The heat and the silence, the sleepers—if they were sleepers—the rigid leaves and petals had an eerie effect. It was evidently the palace of the rajah of Paré-Paré, small doubt of that. And the spot

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was steeped in sleep. One of the guards stirred, shifted position.

Brooks was not curious to enter. The smell of the garbage, of certain filmy pools, was neither inviting nor healthy, and he felt uncertain of what reception might be accorded him. He had a peculiar feeling that the open gate was some sort of a trap, that he must have been seen and the stage set. It was absurd, he told himself, he was not much of a prize for a pirate, much less a rajah, but the sinister suggestion persisted.

Unconsciously, subconsciously perhaps, he started to whistle as he walked around the group of buildings, continuing the path that led on upward. A psychoanalyst doubtless could have detected the reason for the tune—neither loud nor very soft, but a clear, defiant piping. It was, the scientist would say, a defiant reaction from the sense of being an unwelcome alien.

Yankee Doodle went to town
Upon a little pony,
He stuck a feather in his hat
And called out "Macaroni."

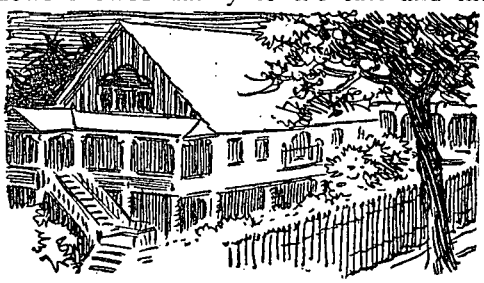
When he discovered he was whistling, and what he was whistling, an air that he had certainly not whistled for years—or thought of—Brooks kept up the fluting, stopping only when he left the path that trailed off indeterminately into the forest. He climbed a steep pitch, almost head-high with ferns, and reached a terrace where not only treetops but all the leaves were waving. It faced the west and the sun drove him in to find shade.

Drowsiness was conquering him, born of the scented air, the sibilant rustle of the boughs and ferns. He had had little sleep aboard the stuffy, smelly *Bromo,* and he stretched himself out on some turf under a sago palm.

Soon he was lulled to swift unconsciousness.

It was dusk in the forest when he woke, blue-green twilight. Overhead the sky was still blue and, where he had entered from the natural terrace, there were hints of sunset, great boles touched with crimson fire. The sun was a full hour's journey above the sea. He had plenty of time to get back to the *Bromo* in time for the evening meal—and he was hungry. He could not see the full sweep of the bay, and the roadstead where the steamer was anchored was screened by big trees.

Brooks half-slid down the declivity to the trail again, and once more found himself softly whistling Yankee Doodle as he reached the outer, eastern wall of the rajah's palace. Above the palisade windows showed darkly to the east and the



jungle, barred with bamboo, small, square, shuttered affairs twenty feet up.

He fancied that a woman's face looked down from one of these, a dusky oval in which eyes flashed, while heavy silver earrings tinkled, but he did not look up. He imagined these outer dwellings might be the quarters of the rajah's wives. It was quite dark back of the bamboo stockade, and he walked through purple twilight between the stout fence and a row of mighty tamarinds along a trail that was surfaced with hard-trodden dirt. Beyond, at the southeastern angle of the outer fence, the sunset streamed horizontally in vivid contrast with the deep shade in which he walked, whistling. Had his sixth sense stirred?

Something came down from above just after he had passed the last window overhead, just before he reached the angle of the compound stockade. It was dully bright even in the twilight, round, like a golden coin and, as a coin might, it lit on its edge and rolled ahead of him. It wobbled a little until it wheeled out into the sunset and instantly blazed into a disc of shining metal. From its center shot one ray of dazzling light, instantly quenched as the object flattened on the ground, but obviously from a jewel.

Intrigue? Some woman of the rajah's household trying her hand at dalliance? A trap?

He stopped whistling, regarding with suspicion the corner where the sun cut across the pathway like a flaming sword. He had brought a weapon ashore, a flat automatic that sagged in his back pocket. Every tyro in adventuring totes a gun in strange places and Brooks was no exception. He halted, shifted the gun to a side pocket where it might be at once obvious and handy. And he kept his hand on the butt and shoved off the safety. He was convinced he was on the threshold of Adventure. Brooks was not a superman, but he was fairly sure of himself in emergency.

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He took in the palace guards, alert now and standing outside the gate in a group. Two of them detached themselves and walked toward him, spearmen plus a wavy *kris* apiece under the tucked knot of their *sarongs*. They were coming leisurely, without any suggestion of challenge. For a passionate race, apt to run *amok*, they acted with a deliberation that Brooks appreciated. He was not keen to start a row just then.

He stopped, took out his cigarette case, opened it with clumsy purpose, spilled three cigarettes to the ground, stooped and picked them up, palming the trinket while he lit a smoke. He dropped it into the pocket opposite the one where the automatic rode. The glimpse had shown it to be a round locket of gold, thin, with a frosted surface, in which a small diamond was inset. It was a small affair, about the size of a ten-dollar gold piece and there were a few fragile links attached to it—links that had made it roll unevenly, finely fashioned though they were.

Because they were broken and still attached, Brooks reasoned that the locket had been snapped loose in a hurry, by someone who was watched or who expected momentary interference. He had seen plenty of lockets like it. It was the sort of gift made to a girl on birthday or Christmas and he felt sure that it belonged to a white woman—though such articles *might* be popular in the Oriental export trade.

He was again conscious of a pricking in his thumbs as he made sure his cigarette was properly lit and waited the approach of the two guards. They came up, short, muscular, alert, ochre-colored turbans, yellow *sarongs* and short coats with collars that stood up at the back of the necks, cut away in front. There was no vestment underneath the open coat. Brooks noted the well developed chests, the swelling calves and figured their capacities for speed and strength. Right hand held pistol butt, left the cigarette as he went on to meet them.

Their eyes, like balls of jet, turned toward him and they slowed up. He passed them and immediately the space between his shoulders became sensitive. If they wanted to put him out of the way—now was the time. A spear flung by one of those compact natives, and that would be the end of John Brooks.

Out of the tail of his eye, as he flicked off ashes, he saw them stop at the corner he had just turned and look up at the windows. He was fairly sure none of them had noticed the rolling trinket and his retrieval of it. They came back, turning out from the widening path, reporting to the men at the gate. One of those was despatched on an errand. Brooks saw him running toward the front of the same house whose rear he had passed. They suspected something. Now two were detached, and were following him down the trail toward the beach. They kept ten paces to the rear, as if they were escort rather than detail to watch him, but he hesitated to take a look at the locket that lay in the lefthand pocket of his linen coat.

A locket that he assured himself belonged to a white woman in trouble.

He came to this conclusion by what he considered logical deductions. But he did not deny that this decision was also bolstered with things that had nothing to do with reason. If a woman, who was a prisoner, and an American, prevented from going to the barred window or afraid to take the risk, had heard a man passing, whistling an essentially American air, would she not strive to communicate with him? Why would not the snapping of a locket chain—for lack of time or opportunity to unfasten properly its regular clutch—the swift tossing of it through the window, surreptitiously, and with a desperate prayer that it might be seen by a man with his wits about him, be the very thing she would do?

As to why she was a prisoner, what manner of woman she was, he seemed to solve that also, beyond conjecture. He knew it was a young woman—not essentially because of the type of trinket, which might have been worn as a giftpiece for many years—but because it was fairly obvious that only such would be held captive.

He dropped his hand in his pocket for another cigarette and match. Again he palmed the locket as he put back the match box. It lay jewelside down as he held his cupped palm in front of him. On the back were scratches, hastily made as if done with the point of a pin.

HELP

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It was a clarion call to his chivalry, his manhood, a clan-cry to his race. Hot blood went tingling through his veins. To his fingertips. He could have turned and shot down the two men whose attitude was now plain—they knew him for a passenger on the *Bromo* and were suspicious of his status since he had come ashore, particularly since he had taken the path that led under the windows of the women's quarters. They were not sure of anything, none too keen to commit an overt act. His disappearance might cause international complications. Doubtless the rajah walked softly when his passions did not get the best of him. They would keep him under observation. But Brooks, with that pin-scratched message echoing through the chambers of his spirit, had no easy task to hold himself in, to keep from storming the compound gate single-handed, automatic against spears and knives.

A white woman immured against her will! It was unthinkable, monstrous!

He decided to go off to the boat to free himself of his spies, to work out some plan of action. MacCreagh would help, he was sure, for all his sourness. He might be able to enlist MacCreagh's assistant, "the bonny fighter." He doubted any response from the Dutch officers. They would think a long time before they took hand in a game that would make them unpopular with any native chieftain.

But MacCreagh would not refuse. If he could get the girl out of the upper room, down to the beach in the dark, off in some sort of a boat, smuggle her aboard! It could be done, he told himself, as he came out of the forest trail and stood where the beach showed clear with the *campong* village off which the *Bromo* lay anchored.

The roadstead was empty. The horizon was clear of hull or smudge.

The steamer had gone!

THE natives clustered all about him, amused at his dilemma. He tried his few phrases of Malay and found them inadequate. No one tried to make any pains to understand words or gestures. He was an infidel, marooned and none too welcome.

Meantime the woman waited in her bamboo cell, not even knowing whether her wideflung locket with its pitiful plea had reached a friendly hand. If he had only whistled a few bars more—Brooks dismissed that thought. This was no time for "ifs."

He saw the *campong* chief approaching, his tall lilac turban above the crowd. The man, as Brooks understood it, was a sort of *majordomo* of the beach, a head steward of the rajah. He would have to handle him carefully. If he was to answer that call of help, and he still held no other purpose, he must be able to move freely. The two guards who had tagged him down were in talk with the official. The latter moved on and faced Brooks, hemmed in by the crowd.

"You no savvy Malay? No savvy Deutsch?"

Brooks shook his head.

"Wha matteh you not go along boat?"

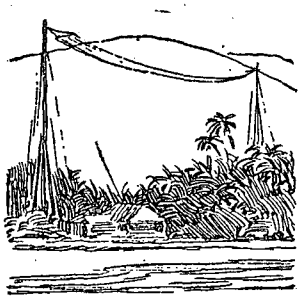
"What matter that boat go without me?" Brooks parried. "They speak me they stop long time, maybe tomorrow morning stop. I go for walk, go in hill, fall asleep. I wake up sun nearly go down. I come along beach, find steamer gone. What for?"

The native followed Brooks attempt at pidgin English carefully.

"Steamer he go along too much trouble this place. Two pieces man die all same two three hour ago. Steamer too much afraid along cholera."

Cholera! Brooks saw again the slimy pools, the filth in the rajah's compound. The prisoner, forced to eat what was prepared for her, exposed to infection. He knew that the scourge, once started, might sweep like wildfire while the dead dropped like flies. The steamer had fled, fearing quarantine as much as the actual risk. Brooks gave them the credit for supposing he was on board. In all probability they would not have thought of him at all, in their haste to get away before the news was out and their trip spoiled.

"No one can leave Paré-Paré befo' doctor come from Macassar," said the official, importantly and smugly. "Steamer send word from Minadar. Wireless along that place."



"They'd have a hard time to prevent me from going," thought Brooks as he looked at the rows of light craft, some beached, others moored to wharfs that extended into the water. The light was still strong, but the sun was close to the edge of the horizon. Thirty minutes more and it would be dark. He'd get away all right—and he would not go alone.

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Then he saw that the fishermen were taking their gear out of the boats for the night, leaving the sails but taking up the sweeps. And there was almost no wind.

He supposed the *Bromo's* skipper had made some arrangement with the port officials as soon as the deaths had been discovered. Women's wailing had likely given that away. The Dutchmen would say that the *campong* chief had warned them, had not permitted them to land, so saving their own detention in quarantine and putting a feather in the lilac turban at the same time.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"All right," he said. "How about some place to stop? I'm not fussy."

The last word puzzled the native but he understood what Brooks meant. For a moment the latter held a wild hope that he would be invited to the palace for the night.

"Chinaman can do," said the other. "All same chow, all same sleep. Leung Chi." He waved a hand up the beach and turned away. Evidently he did not consider the stranded Brooks either dangerous or important. The white man was a fool to have lost his steamer. He could shift for himself.

A native touched Brooks's arm.

"Leung Chi?" he said and pointed to himself, then toward the straggling row of shacks.

Brooks gave him a small coin and the man bowed and vowed that he was *hamba tuan. Tuan* was master, Brooks knew and he followed his guide hopefully.

Leung Chi was the man from whom he had bought the mangoes and rice cakes. He talked the universal pidgin and he led the way to a small room back of his store where there was a table, a lamp that he lit overhead, two bunks against the wall.

"Can do," he said. "You likee chow? Chicken can do. One time I Shanghai stop. Number One cook."

Brooks wanted food and he wanted to be alone. He wondered if he could trust Leung Chi enough to get him a boat—one with oars. He had over two hundred dollars in gold with him in ten-guilder pieces, roughly equivalent to five dollars each, stowed in a belt next to his skin. He had motive enough to get away without mentioning the girl.

While the Chinaman was out of the room, Brooks got at his money. He glanced at the bunks and thought them unoccupied. Now there came a snore from the top one. He thrust the gold in his pocket, gripped his gun and stood on a bamboo chair to peer into the bed.

On his back, his stertorous breath giving out fumes of arrack, lay MacCreagh's "bonny fighter," more unlovely than ever in his drunken stupor. He had taken off his coat and one hairy arm was under his head, the other across his stomach. The tattooed flag showed plainly. Brooks shook him slightly, but got no response save a snore.

He heard a clatter of dishes and was at the table to greet his host. He saw Leung Chi's rotund face change and the slant eyes glitter as they saw the little piles of gold Brooks set out.

"Steamer go. I not see," he said. "Too much sickness along this place. I like get away. Tonight. Suppose you can get me boat?"

He chinked the gold with one hand as a player handles his chips. And he placed the automatic carelessly but conspicuously on the table, his right hand close to it.

"You savvy?" he said. "Five hundred guilders—gold. Tomorrow you know nothing. Maybe I steal that boat. You no savvy."

He quickly set fingers in his ears, over his eyes and mouth.

"No hear, no see, no speakee, no savvy! You plenty rich."

Leung Chi's mask of cupidity broke into a smile.

"Plenty I savvy that," he said. "All same Japanese monkey. Maybe can do. I see bimeby." Brooks pushed over ten of the fifty gold pieces.

"I take that man, too," he said and pointed with his thumb to the bunks.

"Him plenty drunk," objected Chi. "No can walk."

"You give him something make him better maybe? Suppose he eat, drink strong coffee. You fix."

His motives were mingled. He had no liking for the inebriate, but he was not minded to leave in a cholera-stricken *campong* a man who thought enough of his nationality to wear its flag. And MacCreagh's tales of his prowess meant that if Brooks could get him halfway sober and could enlist him, he would have what he sorely needed, someone to stand guard while he got in touch with the girl. The chap would be eager enough to get away when he knew about the cholera. There might be some manhood in him and he could not be drunk beyond recall in an afternoon's debauch.

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"When you give me lest of money?" asked Leung Chi.

"When I get in boat. I want good one. Sails and oars. Plenty chow for two three days."

"All lightee. I tly."

Brooks felt satisfied as Chi left the room after laying the table. The drunken man snored on. Brooks took out the locket and looked at it again under the lamp where the scratched word gleamed out brightly. Fingering the trinket he felt two slight projections, one on either side, a hinge and the lip of a catch. He slipped his thumbnail into the tiny notch and the locket fell apart.

The right hand side was blank. The left——

A face looked up at him, the face of a young man, laughing into the lens. It seemed to have been trimmed to fit the locket, possibly cut out of a group. There were highlights of sunshine on the face, but the likeness was excellent.

Brooks stared, looking at the incredible, gazing at his own picture.

A MOTH burred round the lamp, scorching great wings of silvered green.

Brooks did not notice it. A vision was in front of him. The campus of his college; a girl with a camera. He and two frat brothers in a merry group. Other girls looking on, but only the one in distinct impression.

Anne Noxon! The girl he had liked because she danced so lightly and hadn't talked much. Quiet, starry-eyed and slender in her white gown. The girl that Hussey had said reminded him of the gardens back home. Even Hussey had seen that.

What a fool he had been not to couple it up before. Some hound in Singapore had trapped her. And the rajah! Brooks's face went grim and his fingers closed about his gun.

Anne Noxon! And she had kept his picture all these years. She must have liked him, too. Hollyhocks and pansies! Where she belonged—in a white gown. And now——

He was shaking the man in the bunk back to protesting sense when Leung entered with steaming turtle soup on a tray and cups of thick Arabian coffee.

"Lemme alone, damn you," said the man as Brooks hauled him out of the frowsy bed and set him up on his bare feet, blinking and limp.

"Come out of it, you fool! The steamer's gone and there's cholera in the *campong*. Drink this."

They got the coffee into him and walked him up and down the room, stupid with *arrak*, his eyes set, but slowly coming to his senses. At last he smelled the savory soup and lurched toward a chair.

"Gimme some grub," he muttered and drew the dish toward him, breaking ship's biscuits into it, avidly swallowing the mess. Leung Chi brought more coffee and, after the engineer had gulped it down, the hot food began to react and he stared at Brooks soddenly but with dawning recognition.

"You're Brooks," he said. "What in hell you doin' here? Where's steamer? Mac told me your name. Say, I told that old devil where he headed in this mornin'. An' I quit, jumped the stinkin' hooker. My name's O'Hara. Goin' to stay in Paré-Paré. Got a girl here. She's a *rongeng*. Dances the serpent dance, savvy? That what you're after, buddy? You come with me, pal. My girl's got a sidekick. I've got a date, savvy? Goin' to see her dance up to the palace. One swell bid. You come with me, pal. I'll give you good time, savvy?"

Here was news that was worth while. A dance going on in the compound gave Brooks the one chance he wanted. As for O'Hara—he had handled his kind before. He spoke with stern authority.

"Look here, O'Hara. Snap into it. You've got to sober up. There's cholera in the *campongs* to begin with—and there's worse than that for us to handle. You're an American, aren't you? That flag you've got on your arm mean anything to you or was it just put on there for a joke?"

O'Hara straightened. For a moment the glaze cleared from his eyes. "I fought for it," he said sullenly. "Did you?"

"Yes, and we'll let it go at that. Now then, listen to me. MacCreagh tells me you're a fighter. But a fighter that can't stand on his own feet is worse than a sober

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cripple. You and I have got a two-man's job ahead of us tonight. If you've got the nerve to go through with it."

He had his man now. O'Hara's eyes were blazing.

"Nerve, is it?" Brooks gave him no time to go further, but went at him like a trainer who lashes a stubborn and dangerous brute over the nose. Rage in O'Hara had cleared the passages of his blood, driving out accumulating fumes, galvanizing muscles, nerves and brain.

"I said nerve. We're both Americans. There's an American girl up there in the palace, in the women's quarters. She's facing worse than the cholera!"

"By God! I'll say she is. That slimy snake of a rajah! I'm with ye, sor. D'ye know anything about her?"

"I know who she is. She's just about the age your youngest sister might be, O'Hara. Have you got one?"

"I have that." The random shot had targeted. "Let me get some more of that food and coffee into me, an' we'll git her if we have to wade through hell. Will ye be after gettin' me a gun from Chi? You have one, I see. I'll get me a club, at that. 'Tis quieter an' better for close quarters.

"I'm soberin' fast. If you worked down in the firehold you'd maybe savvy why a man goes raisin' hell with liquor an' women when he's ashore. But I've got some decency to me. Tell me your scheme, sor, and I'm with ye. Glory be, I didn't get too much aboard this afternoon. 'Tis my body's the better part of me, sor, an' 'tis at the service of the little lady this blessed night."

"That's bully, O'Hara! We'll both fill up on grub and I'll tell you my plans, so far as they go. The quieter we pull this off, the better chance we have of going through with it. And we've got to do that."

"As you say, sor. But are ye goin' to let that leery-eyed rajah off without twistin' his neck for him, so he'll look backwards the rest of his life, for his sins? An' that sneakin', squeakin'-voiced purple hat. He does the dirthy work for the rajah. He was in this deal, or I'm a Malay. I'd like to knock his block off."

"I'm with you, O'Hara, but we've got the girl to think of, first and last. They're not going to let us get away too easily. I imagine there'll be fighting enough before we get clear."

"'Tis the best word you've spoken tonight," said O'Hara as Leung Chi came in with a heaped dish of fried chicken and more coffee.

THE plumes of the palms were black as silhouetted velvet against the purple of the sky, studded with diamond stars. There was little sound in the village as they stole out of the back door of Leung Chi's and made for the hill trail. Brooks had got some dark clothes out of the Chinaman's store, blouses and loose pantaloons of Canton cloth cut to replace their own conspicuous whites. They kept to the densest shade, carrying with them, besides their weapons, a saw, with a tin of grease to stop the noise of cutting through the silicious bark of bamboo bars, and a bamboo ladder they had themselves constructed.

They could hear the low plash of the tide through the comparative silence, broken only in the *campong* by low, heart-broken wailings. The grisly scourge was skulking through the night, sowing the seeds of death, touching immediate victims with a skeleton hand.

There was tang of the sea and the spice of the forest—heavy and oppressive. The jungle waved its top in the faint breeze, like a sentient monster.

Hollyhocks and pansies. Home gardens flooded in moonlight. A slim girl in white.

On the hill, more and more distinct as they climbed unchallenged, sounded the throb of drums, the twang of strings, the high voices of women.

The stockade gate was closed. Above the palisading they could see the glow of fire lighting up the sides of the buildings. They set the light ladder against a tree and gained a lower bough overlooking the compound.

Here, at the palace, if they feared the cholera, they made believe to mock it. There were evidently guests from the village, hundreds squatting in a rough circle, others standing back of them. Firelight and torchlight glinted on spangles, jewels, metal of weapons. There were women in many colored costumes that now and then showed in brilliant hues when a torch was shifted or the fire replenished. There were gleams of gold and silver

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thread, bracelets, breastlets, earrings, bangles and head bands. On a dais, his short coat heavy-laced and braided, a jewel flashing from a turban of god brocade, the rajah.

"That's him," whispered O'Hara. "And half of thim women's his wives. You don't see anything of her, do ye? 'Tain't likely."

Brooks was straining his sight to that end, gaining confidence as he scanned the groups without finding her. There were servers at small tables with fruits and drinks. It was likely that there was *arrack* being served, palm toddy and rice wine, that the occasion would wind up in a revel, a debauch, stimulated by the knowledge of the presence of the specter of cholera who might claim any one of them in the midst of the feast.

Clanging gongs swung from bamboo frames, pounded zylophonic wooden blocks, whining one-stringed fiddles and skin-headed drums made up a creepy clamor that stirred the blood with its weird discordances and barbaric rhythms. Women with breastplates set with glass or jewels and strange head-dresses screamed like peacocks as they went through the undulations of the serpent dance. They seemed to be priestesses of some cult and, as they swayed, the audience swayed with them while eyes gleamed.

Out from the columns beneath the main building came a lithe figure with arms that waved like cobras to the flute. Here was the *première danseuse* who had given O'Hara the bidding to the dance. There was a short kris in her girdle that she plucked out as she leaped into the ring while her attendants screamed and postured. She held the wavy blade by tip and hilt as she whirled, fast and faster till it seemed that sparks flew from her as jewels caught the lights.

"Some hit she'd make on Broadway," said O'Hara under his breath. "The main show's just startin'!"

There was a space between the bamboo stockade and the walls of the houses from which the locket had been thrown. The windows stared blank and windowless, black behind the bars. It was not feasible to place the ladder to any advantage, what with its lack of length and the narrowness of the trail between stockade and thick jungle.

Instead they set it once more against a tree and Brooks climbed up until he found a lateral branch on a level with the windows. He was almost positive it was from one of the two nearest the angle of the walls that the locket had been thrown. The face that had peered out on him had been framed by the third.

Very softly he began to whistle Yankee Doodle through his teeth. The quality of tone was not very much unlike that of the great tree crickets that were shrilling about him, covering his performance to any but a listening ear, one quick to recognize the tune.

His only reply was the distant chattering of black apes. There came the perfumed reek of the forest under strange stars. The throb and pound, the twang and scream of the dance sounded, but only darkness and silence were in the barred squares in front of him. Brooks commenced again, fear that had nothing to do with himself stealing over him with a nausea that brought out beads of sweat on his forehead.

If she had been taken away? If he was —too late?

Yankee Doodle went to town——

Louder now he piped defiantly.

A vague figure moved in the second room, and was dimly seen through the bars. A face showed through them. Brooks, creeping out on his bough, knew it through twenty feet of gloom, would have known it through a thousand.

"Anne," he said, "Anne Noxon."

A gasp of indrawn breath, a cautious voice, yet quivering with excitement, with anticipation.

"Who's that?"

"It's Jack Brooks."

"Brooks I knew at college?" Absurd! As if she did not remember. As if she had not carried the picture in her locket through the years. And now—to have such a fairy tale come true!

Small hands clutched the bars. The head drooped.

"Anne, are you ill? Anne!"

"Not ill, but weak and almost fainting with joy, relief, revulsion! No, I'm all right—Jack!"

There was a world of rapture, of disbelief deposed in that last word. Brooks found himself in tune to its note while he turned to action.

"How are you fixed? Door locked? Guarded? Anyone likely to come in? I'll get those bars sawn through in a jiffy."

"The door's bolted on the inside. There's usually a woman with me. Now she's watching the dance. You must hurry. They took away my own and made me wear native clothes because they said the

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rajah was likely to send for me before the night was over."

Brooks felt the hot blood swift in his veins at the simple statement of the risk she had run. Still ran—for there was scant time to spare.

He dropped from the bough, landing on his feet, whispering directions to O'Hara. They set the ladder against the palisade and he mounted, taking the saw with him. They hauled and hoisted up the ladder and Brooks replaced it on the other side against the wall of the house. Then he was on the topmost rung but one, holding with one hand to a bamboo bar, firmly socketed in the hardwood sills. Their faces came to a level as he put the teeth of the greased saw against the fibered cane.

"Jack!" she said, and "Jack!" again while the teeth of the tool gratingly bit in on the stone-hard rind. It was the voice of one who talks in a dream come true.

The saw squeaked as it cut through, close to the sill. Jack Brooks started on the next. The bamboo, still held by the top socket, would not be bent nor could it be broken. There were five in all, and he figured that the removal of three of them would be sufficient. Meantime O'Hara was working on his end of it outside the gate of the stockade. The barbaric uproar of the orchestra and the sharp tones of the singers still continued as Brooks worked desperately in awkward position for the task, none too easy with the Chinese saw.

He flung two bars to the ground. He set the saw on the sill and leaned forward —as did she. Their lips met, and their eyes sought out each other's in the twilight. Her hand was laid atop of his and he felt her palm grow warm. For the moment the world stood still, all else was blotted out.

Suddenly she withdrew. Even in the starlight he could see the warm light die out of her eyes with her motion and gesture of alarm. There was someone at the door. They had come to take her to the rajah!

There was not yet space enough for even her slender body to pass. Brooks crouched. Whoever it was must be allowed to enter the room where he might be dealt with, or he might sound too swift an alarm. For the moment the missing bars might not be noticed. A shot would hardly be heard above the music.

Clutching his gun, not daring to raise his head above the sill too soon, Brooks waited in an agony of suspense, grimly resolute to fire. There came the high-pitched voice of a man, the tones emasculate. It was the *campong* chief.

"Missy, you come along with me now. Rajah like too much to see you. Much better for you suppose you come easy," he added, his voice getting strident. "No good you hide, no good you try make bobbery."

Brooks knew that Anne was stooping low by the window, not to be seen against the sky and stars. If the native would only come into the room!

It was at that moment that the music stopped. The dance was over. The rajah had sent for his white captive. If Brooks shot now he would sound the alarm.

There was a hissing intake of the official's breath. He had noticed the bars, and he came swiftly across to the window, thinking the girl must have squeezed through, keenly apprehensive of what would happen to him, bearing back such news. He thrust out head and extended neck and Brooks's fingers clamped about his throat.

His only stance was the shaky bamboo ladder. To offset that, the native had but one free arm with which to break the choking clutch. Brooks had him jammed against the frame of the window so that he could not bring his left arm into play. He put the frenzy of love and desperation into that grip as he strove to balance himself on his precarious perch. New strength flowed into him as he saw Anne rise up and felt the twining of her fingers in his belt, the touch of her knuckles against his body as she strove to hold him up.

There came a cry from behind, high-pitched feminine alarm, that gained strength as it withdrew. Brooks barely heard it above his captive's wheezing and gurgling. But Anne did.

"There was a woman with him," she said, and Brooks marveled and admired the low steadiness of her voice. "She's gone to give warning. They'll be here in a moment."

Brooks's fingers gripped sinews and

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muscles, and he felt the pumping of the artery he had shut off. He had his man. The native's tongue protruded, his eyeballs started. His whole body was shaken with convulsive tremors. Brooks's fingers shifted a little.

A low cry from Anne. The *major-domo's* arm had withdrawn, seeking—finding—his kris. The blade came up, slowly, jerkily. Brooks's body was unprotected to the razored double edge. The wavy blade would sink between his ribs like a knife going into cheese. He saw it leveled and knew he dared not loosen his hold. It was all he could do to maintain it against the convulsive backward tugs. One hand would not do it—starlight caught the blade—thrust forward—darting like the strike of a deadly serpent.

Still seeking to the last to conquer—it was astounding how hard it was to choke a man—Brooks braced himself against the slicing stab that meant failure—death to him, dishonor for Anne, the end of life's magic, just begun.

He felt the release of Anne's hold on his belt, he saw the swoop of her hands as they grasped the native's thrusting wrist.

Little, brave, inadequate hands. He put all that he had into one dynamic, furious compression as the white hands braked the stab and, swift as mongoose against the cobra's dart, her head bowed and she set her teeth hard, sharp and deep into the official's forearm.

The kris clinked on the sill, slid forward, its edge against Brooks's thigh as it fell to the ground. He did not notice it. He was listening with a fierce relief to the rattle in the man's throat that matched with pride in Anne—fighting for him, with him.

The native collapsed across the sill. Brooks looked for the saw—there was one bar yet to come out. Anne gave it to him. Savagely he ripped through the bottom of the hard cane, and with superstrength wrenched it aside.

"Come," he said. He held her close as he went down two rungs to give her room.

swiftly gauged his level and, with a thrust of his leg, sent the light ladder, with both of them clinging to it, squarely backward. There was no time for shifts. If O'Hara had managed to do what he had suggested, tie the rattan strips they had got from Chi ankle high outside the gates, they had a chance.

He clutched the top of the stockade with his backset hands. His shoulder struck the top of the stockade. Anne lithely clambered round the ladder, waited for him as he joined her. They dropped to the ground together. Brooks felt one leg almost give way, a curious sense of draining strength in it. He put down a hand and felt his thigh drenched with blood where the kris had cut it. He said nothing, prayed it was not too deep, caught at Anne's hand with his own clean one and, gun in the other, raced with her toward the gate.

Behind it was clamor and confused shouting. The gate opened inward and Brooks imagined them jammed and blocked against it for the moment. Outside stood the dim figure of O'Hara, beckoning them on. Chi had furnished him with a stout length of wood as heavy and as hard as iron, used as a lever. This he flourished.

"I've got the sthring tied," he said exultantly. "Good evenin' to ye, miss! Go on with the two of ye. I'll tap a head or two before I catch up with ye."

"Come on," said Brooks. He had let go of the girl's hand, stooping to test the rattan.

"To the devil with you," said O'Hara. "Would you be doin' me out of a fight? I can run twice as fast as you can," he added in a lower tone. "I saw you limp as you came up. You're bleedin' like a stuck pig. Wait—listen to thim yellin' at each other—sure 'tis openin'. Here—twist a bit of a stick in it whin you git a chance. 'Tis up to the last hole. I've given ye first aid. Off with ye——"

Kneeling, he had swiftly wrapped his belt twice round Brooks's thigh and hauled it tight, buckling it so that it sank into the flesh for a temporary tourniquet.

The gate was suddenly swung halfway open and there was a gush of firelight, the sight of fierce faces, gleam of teeth, of eyes that caught the flames, torches, glints of metal, a babel of voices, yells as the rattan caught and tripped their rush, flinging them headlong.

They heard the shout of O'Hara, "Come on, ye devils!" as his club swung. A spear

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came down the trail, slithered past and vanished in the wall of jungle.

Brooks had hoped for a silent getaway. Leung Chi had shown him the boat of his son-in-law, a narrow proa with slender raking mast, unstepped, with sweeps in it, with water, fruit and meat. It lay gently rocking under a fishing wharf, between stout bamboo piles. Brooks had given the money to the Chinaman. He suspected that Chi might guess that it was more than fear of cholera that prompted bribery and flight. It was doubtful if anything happened in the *campongs* of Paré-Paré that Leung Chi did not know about.

Chi would not wait by the proa. They had to rely upon his good faith. Escape was dependent upon such a small matter as oars—for the night was now utterly devoid of wind. If he had moved the proa —had removed the sweeps——

Brooks would not think of that. His anxiety held now with O'Hara. He and Anne would have to dodge aside into the maze of shadows before the villagers came out. O'Hara knew the wharf where the boat lay. He, too, must reach it unobserved.

Brooks heard shots as he ran down the trail with Anne, light as a fawn beside him, the blood squelching in his shoe. He hated to leave O'Hara behind. He had done his own share, but all the reward was his if they won free. He had battled for the love of Anne, O'Hara for the love of fighting—that wasn't fair. O'Hara's motives had been those of a man—to save a woman—he mustn't be sacrificed.

Anne's hand was in his, her closed fingers knuckled into his palm. Brooks felt that he was getting a bit lightheaded and strove to check the thoughts that went racing through him. He was losing too much blood. No more shots back up on the trail. O'Hara's gun was empty. Now it was his club against kris and spear, or his speed.

He ought to wait—but there was Anne! They were both doing their best for Anne.

The *campong* was dark so far. But shouts sounded behind, growing louder, closer.

The houses were in irregular rows, all stilted up, ideal ground for the grim hide-and-seek they had to play. The wharf was to their left. They dodged aside from the trail as bobbing flares showed on it, raced on, zigzaging between the piles, under and about the houses, making for the beach. At any moment the villagers would be out, joining the hue and cry.

There was a chuckle in the darkness, a shadow joining them, O'Hara.

"I fooled 'em fine," he panted. "Led 'em the other way, made a runnin' jump for a porch, swung up, let 'em pass an' doubled back."

Brooks had lost all feeling of strength in his leg that now throbbed and burned furiously where the belt was drawn tight. It had swollen—there was no need of the little bit of a stick O'Hara had suggested —and it seemed about to give way every instant. But O'Hara was with them; now for the right wharf!

It was late, after midnight, still no lights in the *campong*. The villagers might take the row for one of the rajah's revelries, or the dread of cholera might have drugged them. Until they were roused they would not venture forth. O'Hara had, for the time, misled the pursuers.

Here was Leung Chi's own house—the rear of it tight-sealed. Chi would be sleeping with the gold under his mattress. Or pretending to sleep.

They turned in under a house, perched on the edge of the tide that was ebbing now, advanced down the slope beneath the

straddling wharf built out into deep water, ending in a netting platform. The wash came up to their knees, their thighs, they were waist deep—with Brooks's blood still leaking on the brine, the actual wound stinging now below that cincture of agony. The proa at last, the sweeps in place, mast and sail, provisions.

The surface of the bay showed like a sheet of blue steel, reflecting the stars, deep-shadowed where the woods came down to the water between the *campongs*, shadows through which they must glide, a moving shade in still gloom. They would trust to rounding the woody point south, so to another, creeping out toward the lower horn of the bay, down the coast, and to losing themselves before morning among the islets of the Spermunde Archipelago, dodging through until they could run for Macassar. Then the Dutch must protect them.

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A hundred ifs and buts in between. Out of the frying pan now, but the fire ahead. The odds were against their going far unnoticed, and then—a chase in the night. And one without a breeze!

Brooks, still with that sense of light-headedness, strove in vain to banish pessimistic possibilities against which he could do nothing. Such matters were on the knees of the gods. He had done his best, so had O'Hara—Anne was here. Now for the fling of the dice, for *that which happens*.

The proa slid out from beneath the cover of the wharf, floating lightly as a swan. She could sail like a streak, if there were only wind.

There seemed the merest fluttering breath on the bay, like that of a dying man. But surely—Brooks strained sight that seemed to shift strangely in and out of focus—surely that was a breeze flaw lining down from where the northern arm of the bay reached out far to the west.

As shadow moving within shadow they went, Anne in the bow, Brooks steering with one blade, O'Hara paddling. They stroked softly through water that showed long rolls of gleaming seafire, swiftly fading. Softly, like a great water insect, they skimmed close in to the line of the woody promontory, on to its end. There were about it, and out of sight now—for the moment—with lights dancing along the beach, shouts coming over the water but not cries of discovery. They were the sounds of trackers at fault.

"They're not all there," said Brooks. "Maybe they think we're hiding in the *campong* or in the woods. Bound to split up, if only we——"

The stars and their reflections in the water suddenly blent in confused rocketings. He was going to faint.

"There's a jug of *arrack* near you," said O'Hara, his voice seeming to come out of a fog, from a long way off. "Take a swig. Miss, will you creep by me an' see if you can bind up that cut he has in his leg. I'm fearin' he's losin' too much blood. Tear off a bit of your—your costume."

Anne's "Oh!" did more for him than the drink, Brooks believed. And the blood had almost stopped flowing. It was the wading through the water that had started it again, yet cleansed it. No vital sources had been tapped. He needed stimulants to replace the vigor that had leaked away. Meantime he had his reserves, summoned by the concern with which Anne—his Anne—ministered to him.

Anne did not tell her story yet. They were creeping on toward the safety line where the water was plainly flawed by a breeze that did not enter the bay; sneaking along, fathom by fathom.

More shouts and more lights. Lights coming down to join the rest. They had been seen after all by some wakeful watcher over the sick. The hunt was up.

Brooks, his wound forgotten, charged with the potent liquor, every heartbeat gladdened by the presence of Anne, dug in his blade with O'Hara and sent the proa surging along toward the place where the northeast trade laid its track across the bay like the cord to a bow. Beyond it there was wind a-plenty for the proa—no doubt of it now. The high headland to the north had kept it from the bay.

They would go kiting. If they could maintain their start, the chances were still good.

They had to stop paddling to step the mast and tauten the stays. There were lights out on the water now. It was doubtful whether they could be actually seen, but they were going to be followed, their direction guessed.

The waves began to slap at the craft, the wind to fan their faces. The two men swayed up the great sail together, and sheeted in. The breeze was abeam. The proa gathered speed, the outrigger pressed the water into a streak of luminous foam. Fast they went, and faster.

They were sighted now. The big sail had betrayed them, but it did its best to retrieve that, a great pinion wafting them through the night.

O'Hara had shifted forward. Anne sat with Brooks aft—if the double-ended proa could be said to have stem or stern. He held the cleated sheet with one hand. His other arm was about her as she sat close to him.

There were few words but a riot of happiness as the proa plunged on and the strengthening trade spattered little globules of phosphorescent spray aboard.

"I didn't know it was you," she said, "when I threw out the locket. I was watched. There was a woman in the room and I had to jerk it loose to scratch

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it with a pin under my dress. It was such a chance, but I hoped. You whistling Yankee Doodle—an American outside my window. And I did not know it was *you.*"

The pursuing boats—the escape of Anne Noxon and the death of the native official were not to be lightly overlooked—had come up to the windline and were strung out after them. They were hard to distinguish—mere blurs in the night—until first one and then the other showed lights.

"I had hardly any money left after my illness," Anne went on. "We had been at the *Hotel de l'Europe* in Singapore. It was out of the question, my staying on there. It was the steward of the place I finally went to that told me of this chance of a position. It seemed to have come in the nick of time. I could save up enough money to go home. There is only an aunt living back in Massachusetts, but I was homesick."

"For hollyhocks and pansies."

"How did you know?"

"I knew," said Brooks mystically and did not know that he was robbing Hussey of his thunder.

"It was Serani, the native official who met the boat at Macassar. He told me the steamer did not stop, and of course I did not know I was bound to Paré-Paré. We left in a big proa. It was a wonderful trip—till it ended. The rajah——"

He felt her shiver against him.

"Never mind the rajah," he said. "Only I wish I'd had *him* by the throat."

It was plain that the steward of the Singapore third-class hotel had deliberately conspired to deliver a white girl for the household of the native prince. Brooks's registered resolve to interview the steward later on, he kept to himself.

"You didn't know what kind of a woman it was, kept prisoner," said Anne. "She might have been old—or she might have been very beautiful."

"I took a chance—and won."

"But you didn't know it was *me.*"

"But I did. I opened the locket. I had heard in Sourabaya there was an Anne Noxon had gone to Macassar."

"Who told you that?"

"Chap named Hussey."

"Oh!" Anne gurgled reminiscently. "He was very kind to me," she said. Hussey would not have felt flattered at the way she said it.

"So I knew it was you. It had to be you."

She set her face farther into his shoulder.

"I wish you hadn't opened the locket," she said in a smothered voice.

"Why? What difference does it make—now?"

"You'll always think me silly."

"If you only knew how proud it made me feel."

LIGHTS are hard to judge at sea but the false dawn revealed five proas, two of which, double-masted, were coming along like hounds that race with bones between their teeth. So much did the boats gain that they could see, as the light grayed, the excited figures leaning forward, hauling at the sheets. The wind was strong. The nearest island of the Spermundes was ten miles away. They would be overhauled, must be, before they had covered half the distance. The breeze had shifted, hauling closer north. It was a running race, and the big sails had the best of it.

The sky began to flame behind the mountains in the shadow of which they sailed on a wind-whipped sea. The blazing disc rolled up and flung light and color far and wide. It was day.

Brooks had his automatic, dropped into his tunic pocket before he had throttled the native. O'Hara his. They could put up a nasty fight for a while.

O'Hara came aft. His head was bandaged in a turban cloth that was rusty with wind-dried blood. He had a jeweled kris in his hand. In the darkness they had not known him wounded.

"'Twas the snake-dancer gave me this," he said, displaying the knife. "She was the first to spot me when the gates opened an' she meant this to give me a souveneer. Threw it at me. The wildcat of the world, she is. An' after her invitin' me to see her dance!"

"Let me see your wound," said Anne.

"'Tis nothing but a haircut. I'll bet the rajah's nursin' a headache worse than mine. I cracked him one to remimber me by."

They did not see the spurt of flame, but they heard the whine of the bullet and then the report came down the wind.

"That was a high-powered rifle," said Brooks. "Anne, lie down!"

"I will not unless you do with me."

"I have to steer."

"Then I will stay up."

Again a singing missile that bored through the matting sail.

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"The rajah and a sporting rifle."

"An' the devil don't care does he kill all three of us. He's lost his face. He'd kill us anyway, if he got us." O'Hara's eyes met Brooks's meaningly, with a swift side glance toward the girl. Brooks nodded.

Their pistols were discounted now by that mile-shooting rifle. They were in range of too good a marksman. And, foot by foot, fathom by fathom, the two-masted proa gained and the rest, trailing, gained also.

The rajah withheld his shots. Either he was short of cartridges or, sure of overhauling them, he played with them, cat and mouse.

The islands showed up more clearly, flower-gardens of the sea. They could

see some of the fishing fleet making out, but they would not aid them. The proa was barely half a mile behind.

A bullet slapped into the mast, entering cleanly, weakening the stout bamboo that still held, bending like a whip as Brooks let the wind spill clear into the sail. It took clever steering. If the mast went—after all it could only hasten the end. And he was convinced, with O'Hara, that the rajah would sail about them out of pistol range until he was sure he had killed the two men. Then—Brooks might have to kill the thing he loved.

COMING out from between the islands of Spermunde, smacking into the seas, with the smoke from her stack trailing far behind her, a high bow crashing through spray, and a sturdy screw churning astern, emerged a craft designed for efficiency—not beauty—with its deckhouses all forward and its squat body wallowing clumsily but steadily along; a thing of commerce and of destiny—if Hussey was right about the high mission of gasoline.

She was burning what she carried as main cargo, this tanker of the Standard Oil Company of America, U. S. A.—who sold their product even to the Dutch!

No clipper ship, rising over the horizon like a great moon, ever looked half so beautiful. There was no jack flying, only the house flag of the line on the stumpy foremast. Colors were reserved for harbors and other sea occasions. But she was unmistakable and she looked as secure a refuge as the latest battleship. Brooks knew a tanker when he saw one, so did O'Hara.

And so did the rajah of Paré-Paré. He took one sniping shot at O'Hara, waving the turban bandage he had taken from his head; another at Brooks, heading up to cross the tanker's bows, and come into the wind. A third sounded like a spiteful bee—one for each of them—and then the sails were lowered, inhauled, and raised again as the five craft went winging back to the north.

It was Brooks's wigwagging that brought the tanker to a slowdown, put a pilot gangway overside and had a rope flung to the tossing proa, scraping alongside. Curious eyes gazed down from the rail and bridge on the two men in Chinese clothes, bloody and bandaged, their faces drawn with fatigue but their eyes bright; on the girl in costume stiff with gold thread, a girl whose skin against the lustrous native cloth was white as milk and whose eyes were the color of larkspur in old-fashioned gardens.

Hussey, of the Standard Oil, saw those eyes upturned, but not to him. They were bent on the figure of Brooks, limping up the ladder ahead of her, while O'Hara came behind, carrying his gem-hilted kris with the air of a conqueror.

And the look in the eyes of Anne Noxon was unmistakable to Hussey, grizzled of hair and a bit seared of soul, but with enough romance left in him to know and value the things that he had missed.

"Sam Hussey," he said to himself, "I don't suppose they'll give you credit for it, but your middle name is Cupid. If it hadn't been for you he'd never have met her. And by the looks of 'em, there's been Adventure enough and to spare. Hanged if I don't put in the bid for best man. Privilege of kissin' the bride. Reckon I've got that much comin' to me."

RANCH MAGIC

IN THE early 80's the expenses of working a Northern ranch varied from $1 to $2 per head of stock per year, and the stock increased about $5 a head per year in value. The more cattle the less the expense amounted to her head; but the increased-value factor remained constant.—C. E. M.

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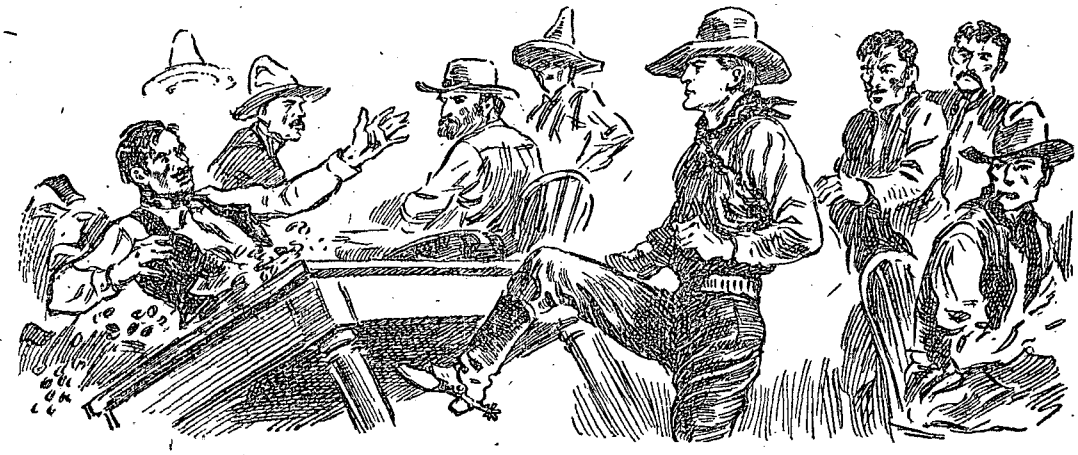

DOUBLE-CROSSED

By HARLEY P. LATHROP

Author of "The Call of Kin," "Rope Shy," etc.

CERTAIN ACTIVITIES IN SUSPICIOUS QUARTERS ALONG THE RIO GRANDE WERE SURE INDICATION OF SOMETHING STIRRING IN THE CATTLE BUSINESS

CON EASTMAN was a tall, sparse old-timer well past sixty. His face was as brown and as seamed as a walnut and, despite his years, his frame was as resilient as a piece of seasoned ash. He had lived his entire lifetime along the border. Cowboy, ranger, soldier of fortune, as circumstances had determined, now on the shady side of life's meridian, he was a fairly prosperous ranchman. Quite naturally he spoke Spanish, and through constant, wit-sharpening contact, he had become an adept at fathoming the devious workings of the Latin mind.

But, as he sat on his broad ranch-house gallery facing Manuel Herera, he was frankly at a loss. It did not seem within the bounds of possibility that Manuel was in earnest in his expressed desire to buy Con's beef steers.

Manuel hailed from the Mexican town of El Celeste, which lay directly across the river from Killen, the nearest American town to old Con's ranch. He was not a cow buyer. His method of gaining a livelihood old Con held in vast contempt. Insofar as Con knew, and he was more or less familiar with everyone of any note on both sides of the border, Manuel was exactly what his appearance indicated—a fat, oily, diamond-bedecked gambling house proprietor.

"The señor theenk I joke," Manuel exclaimed in broken English, reading the look of disbelief mirrored on Con's face. "*Hola!* I weel explain. I have a *compañero,* what you call a beesiness associate. He have a contract to supply beef to the Mexican army. That ees why we weesh to buy. You understand now?"

This materially altered the aspect of the situation. It was not hard to comprehend where Manuel's interest lay. And Con imagined he could surmise the underlying motive for his wishing to purchase cattle on this side of the river.

"A case of graft," was Con's mental comment. "They intend hanging it into the government, and prefer doing it with American cattle so the price can't be traced."

Aloud he asked, "How many head are you looking for?"

Manuel gave an expressive, one-shouldered Latin shrug. "Eet ees not determine," he answered. "Five, seex hundred, maybe a thousand."

Con's faded gray eyes narrowed and he studied thoughtfully. He greatly desired to dispose of his aged steers. The cattle business had been exceedingly dull and the market depressingly low for a long time. He had refrained from selling for nearly two years, hoping constantly with the ingrained optimism of a cowman for better prices. In consequence he was becoming over stocked. Manuel's coming, he

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thought, might be a sort of heaven-sent opportunity.

"I can put up around six hundred," he said at last. "I'm asking forty dollars a head, though," he added as an afterthought.

The Mexican shrugged again indifferently. "How soon can the señor show them?" he asked.

Con hesitated. If an immediate inspection and delivery was desired there was small chance of selling. His cattle, as always, were widely scattered over a range that was brushy and mesquite-dotted. With the canny wariness of an old-timer, Con absolutely refused to keep his livestock under fence. He had a pasture, it is true, but it was never used except as a temporary holding place when working or showing cattle. Years of hard wrung experience had taught him that to keep a large herd under wire in that border country was placing temptation squarely in front of yellow-skinned rustlers from across the river. Night raiders found them too easy of access. On the open range a marauding band might pick up a few head here and there, but the difficulty attendant on gathering made a wholesale steal well nigh impossible.

Finally Con answered, "It'll take me between ten days and two weeks to gather clean," he said.

Manuel nodded. "*Bueno,* we will wait. But I have one leetle favor to ask. When you have gather the cattle, I weesh you yourself to come across the river for my *compañero.* He one beeg señor, one damn fine *caballero.* He like to do business weeth what you call thee beeg boss."

Con expressed his comprehension with a nod. This desire to have the owner himself play the host was characteristic of the Latin nature he knew. And he would gladly defer to it if it meant a sale of the steers.

"I'll come after him," he answered. And so it was settled.

The next day, hiring a number of extra hands, old Con started to gather his steers. Ten days afterward he had upward of six hundred safely in his holding pasture.

The following morning he cranked up his battered flivver and headed for El Celeste. He parked his car on the American side, and crossed the narrow international bridge on foot. It was mid-afternoon by this time, and Con immediately sought out Manuel at the latter's place of business.

This was the town's most prominent saloon and gambling house. It was not the ornate, richly appointed affair of the larger border towns. Rather it was typically Mexican—a long, low-ceiled, dobe-walled room, with a bar extending down one side and the gaming tables taking up what space remained.

When Con entered, Manuel, fat, unctious and suave was lording it behind the bar.

"Ho, ho!" he roared in greeting as he caught sight of Con. "Eet ees my frien' who I have not expect for two, three days. Tomorrow, yes, the *caballero* who buy the steer will be here. Till then, señor, consider my poor place yours."

Frankly, old Con was not much disappointed. He had beforehand discounted this possibility. One must not expect promptness in a land where tomorrow means so much, and today so little.

Courteously thanking Manuel and assuring him he would be on hand the day following, Con regained the street. Here he hesitated undecided, half a mind to return to the American side to spend the night. But he was tired and the blazing mid-afternoon sun was discouraging, so he determined to put up with the poorer accommodations afforded at a Mexican inn.

The following morning the buyer had not shown up, nor was Manuel to be found. Con accepted this fact philosophically, spent the morning loafing about and shortly after dinner again sought out Manuel's place. This time the Mexican was there. He looked as if he had spent a hard night, but he was smooth and unctious as ever.

"Not yet have my frien' arrive," he informed Con. "But the señor must not be impatient. Today he come, of that I am assure."

This time Con was really a little vexed. He consoled himself with the thought that it was no more than could be expected. Still, he never had been able to accustom himself to the dilatory Latin manner of doing business, and time was commencing to hang heavily on his hands. After a few casual words with Manuel, he turned from the bar and stood idly surveying the room.

There was quite a little crowd gathered about the gaming tables, the roulette layout being the most highly favored. The ma-

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jority were Americans from across the bridge, with tourists predominating. Now the whirr of the wheel possessed no fascination for old Con. He had cut his eye teeth in the heyday of his youth, and open gambling was to him an old, old story. So, more with the idea of killing time than for any other reason, he strolled across and stood at the back of the crowd, watching.

The gamekeeper was a rat-faced, oily-looking Don and his voice was as suave as his appearance.

"Sixteen, señors," he proclaimed in exceptionally pure English, as the little ivory ball clicked against the last obstructing peg and, succumbing to gravity, rattled into a slot. "Sixteen, red and even." He deftly raked in the winnings with one hand, and equally as skilfully paid off the lucky bettors with the other.

"Place your bets, señors, a monkey can play it as well as a man. The little ball she once more roll," he monotonously chanted and prepared to spin the wheel.

But one of the players called a halt. He was a short, slight youth, blue-eyed and blond-headed. He wore his wide hat cocked at a rakish angle, on his high-heeled boots he sported a pair of huge silver-trimmed spurs and a sort of a devil-may-care gleam lurked in the back of his eyes. Plainly he was a wandering knight of the saddle in search of a little excitement.

"Just a minute," he begged gently, extending a restraining hand. "How about that dollar I had bet on the red?"

The croupier appraised him swiftly and craftily. Old Con had noted the crooked play. Still, skilled as he was in reading the Latin mind, he was unable to determine whether the pocketing of the cowboy's dollar from off the winning color had been intentional on the gamekeeper's part, or a crass oversight.

"It's a house policy to try an occasional steal whenever a good opportunity presents," Con decided at the croupier's next move. For the gamekeeper, instead of gracefully admitting a mistake, grew belligerent. "If the señor think I have mistake in payin' off, he have my permission to quit."

There was an unmistakable tone of contempt in his voice, and it seemed to arouse some latent sense of antagonism in the blond-headed youth. He wriggled snakily through the throng of players, gaining a place squarely in front of the table.

"Looka here," he remonstrated determinedly, "you may hike a bet on some folks and get away with it, but it don't go with me. If I hadn't seen you do it before this afternoon, I might think it was an accident. I know different though. You goin' to come square and pay me off, or ain't you?"

For a moment the croupier studied the cowboy intently. The youth's face was hard, indomitable, and slowly the fact was borne on the croupier that this time he had selected the wrong chicken to pluck. Nevertheless, he had no idea of backing down. Occasionally such eventualities as this arose and, heretofore, a bold bluff had closed the incident. Once more he let his eyes flicker over the youth, and he addressed him in a voice that was calculatingly insulting.

"I would advise the hombre to take the air if he do not wish much trouble. Children should not argue with men."

Now, if it had not been that the croupier used the reprehensible term "hombre," the blond-headed puncher might have satisfied himself with a few caustic protestations and grumblingly betaken himself away. But the boy was border-wise and fully realized, and what was more, seriously resented the opprobrium of the word when applied to a white man. Instantly, if too late, the croupier realized this and raised his voice in a belated cry for assistance.

Blond-head glanced quickly over his shoulder. From behind the bar, Manuel Herera, the proprietor, was hastily advancing, backed by two truculent looking retainers. He was puffing as he thrust his fat, porpoise-like figure through the curious crowd. The youth saw he was riding for a fall, so concluded to let the tail go with the hide.

"Hombre, huh," he grunted, and with a forceful, well-aimed kick sent the roulette table flying, overturning the smug croupier and scattering a small avalanche of bills and silver.

At this sudden, unlooked for opening of hostilities, the spectators flushed precipitately like a bevy of startled quail, leaving the field to those who were vitally interested. The croupier, struggling out from under the overturned table, rose just far enough to receive a second forceful boot

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square in the face. He crumpled in an ignominous heap, and forthwith lost all interest in the proceedings.

Then the blond-headed cowboy, aflame with the lust of battle, turned to meet the advancing proprietor.

"Ho, ho, name of a peeg," roared Manuel, who, infuriated beyond all promptings of caution, his fists flying wildly, was advancing to demolish the obstreperous puncher.

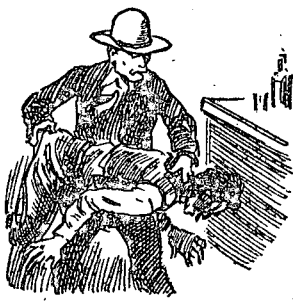
Like a lithe, smooth-muscled cat, the blond-headed youth launched himself at his oversized adversary. Dodging inside the waving arms, he let drive. With the force of a battering ram his fist impacted pulpily against Manuel's fat face, and two hundred-odd pounds of outraged Mexican hit the sanded floor.

Pandemonium reigned! The spectators crowded still farther back, the other gamekeepers gathering in their stakes retreated without the circle of activities. Underneath the table the croupier reposed quietly while Manuel in grotesque semblance to a bloated fat crab, clawed his way on his hands and knees toward the door, bellowing raucous cries for assistance. The blond-headed puncher, confronted with the difficult task of keeping the two remaining adversaries in front of him busy, watched for their first move.

Old man Con, who stood with his back to the bar, had observed the youthful gladiator's efforts with unmixed approval. But, nevertheless, much as he sympathized with his fellow countryman, he remained strictly neutral. That is, he did until one of the two who were facing the blond-headed warrior drew a wicked-looking knife and began circling for an opening. This unfair use of cold steel was a trifle more than old Con could stand.

He suddenly roused into a state of activity, with a well directed kick planted with the toe of his boot against the Mexican's wrist. The knife clattered noisily to the floor, and old Con put his foot on it. This act would no doubt have concluded Con's part in the affray had not the Mexican incautiously directed at him a snarled imprecation. In all his sixty-odd years a greaser had never yet cursed Con and got away with it.

Calmly, with no display of heat, but in a manner that was highly efficient, he reached out and gathered in the greaser by the nape of his neck and the seat of his pants. Then in a manner equally as casual, he butted his black-topped head against the bar until he went limp. With careless abandon he tossed him behind the bar.



The blond-headed youth had caught this bit of byplay from the tail of one eye. "Thanks, cap," he remarked from the corner of his mouth, and throwing aside all vestige of caution, tore savagely into his remaining adversary.

The chances are he would have come off with flying colors but for an unfortunate circumstance. Manuel's frantic hails had brought to his assistance from without a small squad of white-trousered *soldados*. Advancing into the room at a dog trot, their sandaled feet making no noise, the foremost, reversing his gun, planted the butt under the blond-head's ear. Without a struggle, he collapsed in a limp heap.

Impelled by a sudden, inexplicable wave of sympathy for the vanquished warrior, old Con took a single step in his direction, then abruptly he checked himself.

"Better stay out of it," he mumbled in a cautionary undertone. "I sure hate to see a white man mishandled by a greaser, still I ain't got no cause to interfere in this case. He's a plucky little game cock all right, and a night in jail won't hurt him any."

The blond youth had by this time regained consciousness, thanks to copious dashes of water administered by one of his captors. He lurched drunkenly to his feet, and stood swaying until, by degrees, his sense of equilibrium returned. Then, closely herded by his captors, he was ushered to the street.

Old Con left the gambling hall in their wake. For an hour or so he strolled about and returned at last to the inn to mope disconsolately until supper time. Inured as he was to scenes of violence, he found it impossible to banish the afternoon's happenings from his mind. And the more he reviewed the battle, the more unstinted was his admiration for the pugnacious puncher's courage.

"Doggoned little spitfire," he muttered while eating. "I ought not to go near him." This was equal to a confession that old Con was about to obey the dictates of his soft old heart, and see if he could not be of some assistance to the prisoner.

So, after finishing his meal, he casually

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strolled around to the *cuartel* where his experience told him the youth would be confined. There Con met something startling.

"*Incomunicado,*" was the *comandante's* brief reply when Con requested to see the prisoner.

This terse word conveyed a wealth of meaning to the old cattleman. Anyone at all cognizant of the ways of the country knew that only prisoners charged with serious offences were kept in solitary confinement. It was obvious that some far graver charge than simple assault or disturbing of the peace had been preferred against this one. And this knowledge, if anything, only served to augment Con's growing desire to see and talk with the blond puncher. So, being well aware of the potent effect of American gold when measured against a greaser's sense of duty, he covertly displayed a double eagle. It had the designed effect and very shortly he found himself admitted to a small, iron-grated cell.

Here Con received a second and greater shock. The youth that rose stiffly from a pallet on the floor was but a pitiful caricature of the one who had followed his captors from the gambling hall. He was hatless, and his hair was awry; his clothes were torn and blood-stained, one eye was swollen completely shut and his face was cut and bruised shamefully. He stuck out a skinned and puffy hand.

"My name's Leach Culver," he said with a whimsical smile that twisted his swollen features grotesquely, "a little the worse for wear, but still in the ring."

Con gingerly shook the battered hand and made known his name. Then he asked bluntly, "You wasn't foolish enough to try and escape on the way over here, was you?"

Leach Culver shook his head. "No, I wasn't, but if I'd known what was coming to me, I'd have taken a chance. They been paying me back and adding a little interest," he explained. "About an hour ago that big greaser, Manuel, showed up with a bunch of rough-looking hombres. Apparently he's got considerable pull around here, as they let him in without any question, and he and his crowd went to work on me. I handed them back aplenty, but there were too many. I guess I'm in for it all right. As it happened they failed to search me when they locked me up. I had a gun under my arm and when that bunch got rough, I went for it. I got one, only winged him at that," he explained regretfully, "but I expect it's enough to stand me up against a wall come morning."

Now it was common knowledge along the border that never had a greaser laid violent hands upon old Con and lived to boast about it afterward. Consequently it was not at all strange that the cattleman's gorge began to rise upon hearing this tale, and with it a grim determination to free the youth from the Mexican's clutches.

"You say Manuel seems to have considerable pull around here?" he asked, attempting to hide the sympathy in his voice under a tone of assumed gruffness.

Leach nodded. "Right smart I should say from the way everybody knuckled under to him.

Old Con cogitated. This was nothing extraordinary. Mexico was a land where the possession of riches meant much power, and intrigue was the very breath of life. Manuel had undoubtedly accumulated the one, hence the other followed as a matter of course. He would be the proper one to see, Con decided.

So he said, "You take it easy a while, son. I may be able to straighten out this mess as I have a deal on with Manuel myself. You are in a bad jackpot all right, but possibly I can clear things."

The blond-headed boy's face twisted into a one-sided smile. "I'm obliged to you," he thanked him simply. "I'd sure appreciate getting out of here."

Con, leaving the *cuartel,* hurried to Manuel's place of business. The gambling hall was thronged, and Con was unable to locate Manuel among the jostling crowd. In desperation he appealed to one of the yellow skinned minions who presided behind the bar. The bartender shrugged indifferently.

"He ees gone. *Mañana* he return."

"Tomorrow, tomorrow, everything is tomorrow with a greaser," Con grumbled, turning away from the bar in disgust. Then he was struck with a sudden suspicion. "I'll bet a pretty that hombre is playing hide-and-go-seek with me. One of those two-bit soldiers about slipped out and told him I was in talking with the boy. Manuel figures that I'm going to try and get him out, and is dodging me so I can't ask his assistance. And if

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he's got it in for the lad that strong, he'll just about stop his clock tonight."

The longer Con mused along these lines the more confirmed became his suspicions. And this served only to intensify his desire to free Leach Culver.

"Well, there's more ways than one of skinnin' a cat," he soliloquized, and forthwith started down the street.

Con shrewdly surmised that it would be an impossibility for him again to gain admittance to the cell where Leach was confined. And, too, he did not want any shreds of suspicion to hang about him, providing the stunt he now proposed to try worked out to a successful conclusion. For Con still entertained some lingering hopes of selling Manuel his steers despite the other's obvious playing off. But whether or no, sale or no sale, he had grimly determined to attempt to rescue Leach Culver.

A few doors from the gambling hall Con stopped and entered a dingy general mercantile establishment. There he purchased a file and a small bottle of oil. Then he headed for the *cuartel.*

The building, a sort of a combination barracks and jail, was a large oblong structure of adobe occupying half a square and facing a small plaza. A narrow line of cells, each with a single heavily-barred window, extended the length of the building, parallel with one street. Con, recalling their arrangement to his mind's eye, placed Leach Culver's cell as the fifth down.

Crossing the plaza, he loitered idly on the corner opposite the *cuartel.* A single sentry, a small insignificant figure with a gun almost as long as himself, paced slowly beneath the barred windows. With a little sense of elation Con noted that his beat rounded a corner at the back of the building, and that it was some moments before he reappeared on his return trip. Con watched until the sentry had disappeared from sight, then unobtrusively he crossed the street, halting opposite the window of Leach's cell.

"Hey, son," he called softly.

A tousled blond head, then a bruised face appeared.

"Here, catch," Con directed, hastily tossing in the small package containing file and oil. "I'll give you an hour to cut those bars. Work carefully, so you won't be overheard. Then keep an ear cocked for my return." Foregoing any further explanation, he hurriedly crossed the street and slipped into a shadow.

In an hour to a dot Con was back. From the concealment of a shadow he watched the sentry pace the length of the window-pierced wall and around the corner. Then hastily, but displaying infinite caution, Con stole noiselessly down the length of the wall, and took up his position at the corner. Presently he heard the sentry's returning footsteps. Flattening himself against the wall, Con waited until the unsuspecting soldier turned the corner. A flash of a pistol butt, a dull, crunching thud and the sentry crumpled.

In a twinkling with a cord he produced from his pocket, Con had him trussed and gagged. Dragging him into the obscurity afforded by a deep gutter, he hustled back, stopping underneath the window of Leach's cell.

"Quick now, son," he called. "Push out those bars and climb through."

Came a sharp snap as Leach twisted loose the filed gratings and immediately his slight figure wriggled outward, dropping lightly to the ground.

"Come on," whispered Con and wasting no time in explanations, started at a dog trot, keeping to the shadows. Taking advantage of darkened alleys and favoring narrow, deserted streets, he led the way to the town's outskirts. Here he stopped.

"Listen," he said, cutting short Leach's protestations of gratitude, "I've done all I can for the present, anyway. You keep on up this road about a quarter of a mile, and you'll come to a small shack with a corral in the rear. You'll find some horses penned there. Catch one and keep on up the river. Nobody'll bother you, I've done fixed it with the hombre that owns them. Hug the bank pretty close and about six miles up you'll hit a good-sized clearing in the brush—Mejia's ford it's called. The river's shallow there, and you can cross to the American side. They ain't no use trying it below as the stream's higher than a cat's back and running like a mill race. Come morning you can find my place and lay up until I get back."

Culver listened attentively to these instructions but at the conclusion shook his head. "Expect I'd better try it lower down, high water or no high water," he disagreed. "I'll bump into a regular rat's nest of greasers if I try the ford."

"How come?" demanded old Con, wondering how in the world Leach knew a band of Mexicans would be camped at Mejia's ford.

"After Manuel and his crowd had finished beating me up," Leach explained, "he stopped outside my cell and started an ar-

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gument with the *comandante*. They did not pay any attention to me. From what I gathered, Manuel plans on crossing a big herd of cattle about midnight at the ford, and holding them there until daylight when they will start back-country with them. He was trying to talk the *comandante* into lending him a few soldiers to help night herd. That's why I'm sort of scary about trying to cross there."

For a short space Con did not offer any comment and Leach, glancing up, discerned on his wrinkled face a curious, half-puzzled, half-comprehending look.

Finally old Con asked, "You didn't happen to hear any brand called, did you?"

Leach scratched reflectively at his bruised head. "Seems like I did hear some mention of a Bar E Bar brand," he replied. "Still, I couldn't swear, things was sort of hazy just then. Why?" he asked curiously.

But Con did not reply at once. He was too busy adding two and two together. It was rather a painful task, and it filled him with chagrin, for it was very obvious that the gambling house proprietor had played him for a good-sized sucker.

"Simple as falling down a well," Con muttered, reluctantly granting a certain meed of admiration to the fertile brain that conceived the scheme. It was as plain as day to him now.

Under the plausible pretext of buying, Manuel had prevailed on old Con to gather his steers and hold them in a pasture where they would be easy of access. He had tooled Con across the river and kept him dangling about waiting hopefully for the coming of a non-existent buyer. With the directing spirit of the Bar E Bar safely out of that immediate neighborhood, Manuel evidently figured the greatest obstacle was removed, and he could rustle the cattle with impunity. And Con knew the Mexican had planned craftily. His holding pasture was close to the river and while he had left positive orders for a rider to patrol the herd nights, it was more to guard against the possibility of the cattle breaking fence than with any thought of rustling in mind. An organized band would have no trouble waylaying and overpowering the lone and unsuspecting hand.

Con's mouth drew straight in a grim, forbidding line and when he answered, his customary drawl was tinged with a curt decisiveness.

"Looks like we are both in a jackpot now," he said, and forthwith explained the situation to Leach Culver. The blond-headed puncher gave a surprised whistle. "Any chance of blocking the steal?" he asked.

Con shook his head. He had already reviewed the situation from every angle, and had decided that it was hopeless to attempt to secure help from the American side. It was far too late to think of such a course. And he knew that an appeal to the Mexican authorities would prove futile. Manuel was far too strongly entrenched in that quarter.

"Listen, son," he said, "let's go on up the road to where the horses are. I believe I can fix it with the man that owns them to hide you out until you can make the crossing in safety. I'll catch me a horse and mosey on up the river. There's no chance of getting the steers back, but I'll have a little interview with Manuel. You can take my word there'll be one good greaser and maybe more after I'm through."

Leach hesitated as though unwilling to oppose Con's wishes, but there was a reproachful look on his face. At length, with a sudden impetuosity, he blurted out, "Like the mischief I'll hide out and let you go alone. I'm free, white and twenty-one," and in a stormy torrent of words he made known to old Con his intention of coming if he had to walk. Old Con was not the only one that had a bone to pick with Manuel, he said.

Con heard him out with a little quizzical smile. "Regular little old hell cat for trouble, ain't you?" he bantered, but there was a pronounced tone of admiration in his voice. "I don't guess it'll take more than one of us to settle Mr. Manuel's hash, but if you're so plumb set to be there, come on."

A quarter of an hour later found them riding away from the shack headed up-river. "No use hurrying, we got plenty of time," cautioned Con, curbing his restive horse down to a walk. "The moon'll be up toward morning, and I figure a little light will be mighty handy when the showdown comes."

Leach nodded and for several miles they rode in silence, letting the horses pick their

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own way through the mesquite. They kept close to the river, guided by its constant murmur.

At length Con, who had been sunk in a brown study, suddenly roused himself. "I mighty near forgot," he said apologetically. "Reckoned you'd be a little hungry, so I foraged around that fellow's shack for something to eat." He produced from his pockets two tins of peaches, handing one to Leach. "This was all I could find except some frijoles. Funny thing," he commented, "every greaser I ever saw is hell for tinned peaches. Beans and peaches, that's a devil of a combination," he snorted.

For some reason old Con now seemed to be as garrulous as he had been reticent during the first part of the ride. "If there was about three more of us," he said argumentatively, "I'd be tempted to try and stampede those steers back across the river. Two of us couldn't do it, though. We couldn't make noise enough to get them started good."

Spearing the last remaining peach half, he gulped down the juice and tossed the tin carelessly aside.

Leach, who was in the act of following suit, hesitated, shot by a sudden inspiration. The old man's remark about a stampede together with the clink of the can as it struck the ground, jarred a dormant memory chord. Still clutching his own can, he pulled up his horse, dismounted and back tracking a few steps, searched until he found the can Con had tossed away. He picked it up and coming back tied both cans securely to his saddle.

Old Con had watched him with a mild inquisitiveness. "Goin' in the hardware business or just collecting pretties?" he asked a trifle sarcastically.

Leach shot him a lop-sided grin. "You ever ship any calves?" he countered.

Con looked blank as if he were debating whether the youth had taken leave of his senses sure enough.

"Well, I have," continued Leach. "Where I worked before I hit the border the cowmen all shipped the bulk of the calf crop to market. First off before they learned better, they used to take both the calves and their mammies to the shipping pens before separating them. Then for a good week after getting the cows back home, they would be continually busting out of the pasture and running back to the shipping pen hunting their calves where they had last seen them. It caused a whole lot of trouble, and finally the shippers hit on a way of separating the calves and cows at home and driving the calves to the railroad alone. The whole trick of it was to stampede them away from their mammies and run them until they were plumb tired. After that they'd handle. Jumping them off in the first place was the hardest job. Whip popping or slicker shaking did mighty little good, but they finally hit on a way. Now I got an idea we could—" and Leach plunged into a lengthy explanation.

At the conclusion old Con chuckled. "It's worth a try anyway," he conceded, his professional interest aroused. He was still indulging in an occasional, intermittent chuckle when they approached the ford some little while later.

The moon had now risen, outlining in bold relief each scraggly mesquite clump. It shone luminously down into the clearing beside the ford, throwing into distinct sharpness the six hundred-odd head of tired steers bedded there. Con and Leach halting in the brush a hundred yards back, tied their horses and cautiously reconnoitered on foot. Skulking from bush to bush, bending low as they hastily flitted across each small opening, the pair gained the edge of the clearing unobserved. A gentle soughing murmur arose from the bedded cattle as they chewed their cuds. Silhouetted against the rim of the sky, dotted at regular intervals about the herd, half a dozen *serape* enfolded Mexicans sat quietly on their horses. Close by the river and to the left of the ford, little crimson, flickering tongues of flame marked a camp-fire. A figure was bending over it, and the musical clink of pots and pans punctuated the throaty Spanish love song he was singing.

"Seven of them all told, and only six mounted. That's Manuel, the big one near the bank," Con commented.

For a space the pair surveyed the peaceful scene silently then Leach plucked at his companion's sleeve. "Let's wake them up," he said.

Retracing their steps they gained their horses. "It's up to you now to fix the medicine," old Con remarked.

Leach grinned and without a word removed the two tin cans from his saddle.

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Dropping to his hands and knees he searched patiently about in the sand until he had gathered a small heap of pebbles. Dividing this into two parts, he transferred the heaps to the two cans. Then he fastened the tops down tightly and handed one can to old Con.

"I'll guarantee that'll chivaree 'em," he said. "If we rattle 'em fast enough, those greasers'll think a regiment of tin soldiers are charging, and the steers will go plumb loco." As he started to remount the grin faded from his face. "I wish I had that gun they got offen me," he said wistfully. "I feel like I was about to tackle a hornet's nest barehanded."

Old Con reached for a pocket. "I'm sure forgetful tonight," he excused, displaying contrition. "I meant to hand you this before we left the shack. I don't hold much for these play toys myself, but I find it's a heap easier to carry two of these than one Colt," and he passed over to Leach Culver a dull blue automatic.

Leach mounted. The home-made rattle grasped in the left hand, their reins and gun in the right, they prepared to open the ball.

"I sure wish those steers was on their feet," Leach observed in an undertone as he settled himself in the saddle. "It'd be a sight easier to jump 'em off."

"Well, we'll put 'em there, then," old Con said dryly, and inhaling a long breath, opened his mouth. Once, twice, thrice, the eerie, blood-curdling wail of a Mexican jaguar pierced the silence. "Two bits even that'll make them stand up," old Con said softly. They bent forward over their horses' necks and listened. Little throaty, warning bellows, the clashing of horns and the scraping of hoofs as the steers heaved themselves upward, bore unseen evidence that the ruse had been successful. Implanted deeply in each animal was an inherent fear of the great marauding cats. From calfhood they had known that it was highly dangerous to lie at ease when a slinking jaguar was on the prowl.

"Reckon I better give 'em one more for good measure," said Con, and for the second time a cry like the shriek of a soul in torment rang forth.

Then shaking the pebble-filled cans violently, screeching like two insane demons, the pair sank home the spurs and disregarding the intervening brush and cactus, drove straight for the uneasy herd.

At the first creepy wail denoting the proximity of a jaguar, the Mexican herders had nervously gathered their *serapes* about them, casting little looks of fear and distrust into the surrounding brush. Almost as much as the cattle, they dreaded the coming of the yellow, slinking cat. The second demoniacal wail filled them with still more uneasiness and the uncanny rattle of the pebble-filled cans together with the fiendish shrieks of the two riders proved the last straw. Their superstitious natures obsessed by a dread of the unknown, proved their undoing. What little courage they possessed deserted them at this juncture and setting spurs to their horses, every man for himself, they sought safety in flight.

Taking cue from their herders, like a rushing torrent, in an irresistible, surging avalanche of tossing horns and pounding hoofs, the panic-stricken steers broke and ran. Following the dictates of instinct, they headed straight for home in a mad, hair-raising stampede. With no front riders to swing them, they hit the ford in a compact plunging mass. Crowding, hooking, bellowing, mad with fright and excitement, treading under any unfortunate fellow that chanced to lose his feet, they hurtled through the water and up the opposite bank. Once on *terra firma* they scattered into the brush like chaff blown from a thresher. And behind them, still hoarsely shrieking, rattling their cans like mad, rode old Con and Leach Culver.

Leach, riding to the right of old Con had discerned through the moonlight a single rider jammed tight in the center of the stampeding herd. Less hasty than his brother rustlers in seeking the security of the brush, somehow at the first jump off he had been caught amid the jam and powerless to extricate himself he was carried forward willy-nilly. Each second Leach expected to see the high-crowned hat that marked the bobbing figure, vanish as his horse went down. But the horse, a powerful animal, managed to retain its feet and struggle up the opposite bank. There on firm ground the Mexican attempted to swing his mount when a half-mad steer, plunging for the brush, side-swiped him. Caught off balance, both horse and rider hit the ground.

Instinctively, forgetful that the rider was an enemy, Leach spurred to his assis-

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tance. Checking his horse abruptly he swung from the saddle. The Mexican, his broad hat fallen so that it concealed his features, was pinned beneath the horse. Dropping his can, Leach grasped the rider's left hand and tugged. With a lurch the fallen man gained his feet and turned. It was Manuel Herera.

For a bare instant and in a silence that was fraught with possibilities, the pair, left hands locked, stood facing each other. Then Manuel recognized the blond-headed puncher and figuring him unarmed, with a murderous snarl of hate, reached for his gun. Leach, who had pocketed his automatic some time back, was equally as quick. For a barely perceptible instant they hesitated, tensed and quivering, each waiting for the other's move. Then of one accord, they released hands and slowly began to back away, guns spouting death. At the ceasing of the last staccato bark, both stopped, each swaying slightly and then as if they were two puppets controlled by a single string, crashed to the ground.

Old Con, who from a distance had observed the battle, spurred rapidly up. Ignoring the fallen Mexican, whose life blood was staining the ground, he bent anxiously over Leach. With tender fingers he loosened his clothes and cautiously explored for wounds. To his intense relief the blond-headed youth opened his eyes and wriggled slightly as though to take stock of his injuries.

"One in the shoulder, one in the side and a rip in the arm, outside of that I'm all right. And, oh, boy," he grinned lopsidedly at old Con, "didn't we double-cross those double-crossers right?" Then with a satisfied sigh, he fainted away.

GREAT STAGE RIDES

THE most spectacular stagecoach rides of the old days were those of Ben Holladay. He rode from Placerville, Cal., to Atchison, Kans. (1900 miles; schedule time, 18 days), by special coach and arrangements in a trifle over 12 days. The run cost him $20,000 but gave his line tremendous advertising and won an increased appropriation from Congress. In a ride from Salt Lake City to Atchison (1200 miles; schedule time 11 days) he covered the distance in 8¼ days. In 1865 Bowles and Richardson made the 575 miles from Salt Lake City, Utah, to Virginia City, Nev., in 72 hours of actual riding time; and from Virginia City on to Placerville, Cal., over the famous road across the Sierra Nevadas, a 72-mile run, in 7 hours, stop included.—C. E. M.

AFRICAN WOOD THAT RESISTS THE TEREDO

THE world-wide spread of the teredo, the marine boring worm that destroys the piling of piers in all Pacific ports and many of those of Europe and has lately menaced the New York and other North Atlantic harbors, has led to a world-wide search for some kind of wood that will resist the attacks of these parasites. Such a wood is said to have been found in British East Africa. It is called by the natives "M'Sengeru," and by the English settlers, "yellowwood." Some has been exported to Europe as "African pine." Logs left floating for a year under teredo-infested piers were untouched, while the piles of the piers were destroyed. Extensive lumbering of great forests of yellowwood has been begun.

COLOR OF SOIL AFFECTS ITS FERTILITY

THAT the color of the soil has much to do with its fertility is indicated by tests recently made in France. The surface of a vineyard was covered with a thin layer of cement, holes being left for the vines to grow through. Parts of the cement were painted red, other areas black and the rest white. The vines whose roots were under the red and black surfaces were twice as vigorous as those under the white surfaces. The cause is the absorption of heat by the black and red surfaces and its reflection by the white. The soil under the darker portions was found to be of a decidedly higher temperature than under the white part. The fertility of the black soil of the "Corn Belt" and of the reddish loams of Southern France is thus to some extent accounted for.

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THE WHITE JADE SEAL

By H. BEDFORD-JONES

Author of "Everything for Nothing," "A Tale That is Told," etc.

WHO KNOWS WHAT SHAPES ARE ASSUMED BY THE GODS OF VENGEANCE AS THEY PROWL UP AND DOWN THE CHINA SEAS

I

GARVEN, mouthing his cheroot in the smoking-room, idly fingered the white jade seal that depended from his watch-chain. This seal was an odd thing. Garven himself was odd. Most singular of all, however, was the fact that the man sitting on Garven's left should have laid down his book at this precise instant, thus catching sight of the jade seal.

If you are at all intimately acquainted with the line of mailboats running from India to Rangoon, you have heard some queer tales. None of them surpasses the story of the white jade seal when it comes to queerness, however.

Garven was tall, dark, bearded and silent, his eyes darkling with hidden fires. The man on his left was small, spectacled, rather chubby, yet with a mouth that expressed unreasonable determination, a regular trap-mouth in fact. Garven's looks spoke of the far hills and jungle, those of the other man of cities and clubs. The latter was down on the passenger list as John Manning, commercial traveler.

"Beastly hot night," said Manning, an instant after he laid down his book. Garven gave him a swift glance, found him cherubic and smiling, and nodded gravely.

"Very. Drink?"

Manning nodded and gave his order, for Garven had previously beckoned a boy. Presently the drinks came. The glasses were touched and sipped. Manning mopped at his brow, which had suddenly become finely beaded with perspiration.

"Devilish country, this!" he said impulsively. "Glad I don't have to stay in

it. You look as though you didn't mind, though."

Garven smiled slightly. "I don't. It's good country for men, up in the hills!"

"The hills?" Manning turned to him with voluble interest. "Did you hear about that horrible affair upcountry? Rangoon papers were full of it last week. I don't call that a good country; I call it beastly! I read a little something about the details, but not very much. Those two chaps who murdered each other, I mean—or one of them murdered the other, which was it?"

Garven mouthed his cigar, then took it out and carefully inspected it. One gained the distinct impression that he was trying not to look startled.

"You have it wrong," he said slowly and steadily. "You misunderstood the reports. That is, if you refer to the case of Smithsend and Ormsby."

"That's the one," affirmed Manning eagerly. "Those two mining chaps, you know, who had been up into the Shan country looking for gold or tin or something. They'd been gone a long while, given up for dead by everyone, until this story came out—oh, yes! Rubies, that was it. They were after rubies. I swear I had the idea that one of them had murdered the other! Perhaps I read the story amiss. Some chap brought down the yarn—found the bodies or something. Who was he?"

"I was the chap," said Garven. Manning strained around, staring at him blankly.

"You?"

Garven nodded. "Yes. You see, I happened to run across Ormsby's boy in the hills, dying. He had been captured by the hill tribes and escaped. He told me the whole thing. If you'd be interested in learning what really happened——"

"Oh, yes, yes!" exclaimed Manning. His eyes fell for an instant to the white jade seal. "Yes, do tell me! Let's have that boy fill the glasses again, eh?"

Garven nodded and the boy came. When he had filled the orders and gone again, Garven composedly told his story.

"It's not much of a yarn, though the newspapers played it up," he said, when the boy was out of earshot. "The two

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chaps got into trouble with the hillmen, and had to run for it. Finally the beggars surrounded them on a hill. They held out for a week, until their last cartridges were used up, and then were rushed. After I heard about it, I went there, found the place, and buried their bones. So that's the whole thing, and not as you had it."

"Oh!" said Manning disappointedly. "So that's the way of it!"

"Exactly," said Garven, and puffed at his cigar. His fingers toyed with the white jade seal, and Manning leaned forward to look at it, frankly enough.

"That's a curious thing! May I see it?"

Garven started slightly, then laughed and held up the seal. It was a trifle over an inch long, a long cube of white jade with a gold ring sunk in one end. On the other end was cut a Chinese inscription in tiny characters.

"It's Malay, isn't it?" asked Manning innocently. Garven laughed at that.

"Oh, no! Chinese! I picked it up in a Singapore bazaar two years ago—it's a seal, you know. The ideographs mean good luck, or something of the sort."

"Odd thing," said Manning, then picked up his book and rose. "Well, I'll say good night, and thanks very much for the story. Queer how I got it so jumbled."

"Night," said Garven.

Manning left the smoking-room. He made his way to the upper deck, and there stood for a moment at the rail. Then, deliberately, he flung his book overboard and watched the splash in the phosphorescent rush of water alongside; it was a gesture as though he had finished with something forever. Drawing a deep breath, he turned aft and went to the purser's cabin, at which he knocked. The purser was splitting a bottle of beer with the first officer, and Manning crowded into the little cabin, and sank on the bunk.

"Greetings and long life, old son," exclaimed the purser cheerfully. "Mac, reach him down another bottle——"

"And then go turn in, like a good little boy," said Manning solemnly.

The first officer collared a bottle of beer and went to the door.

"I wouldn't drink with two bad eggs like you anyhow," he declared, and then grinned as he departed. John Manning seemed to be rather well known aboard here.

"Now, old son, spit it out!" said the purser, wiping his mustache. "Here, I say! What's it all about? Buck up, buck up—this won't do!"

Manning was leaning back in the bunk, looking whitish and rather ill. He smiled faintly, then his trap-mouth set in thin lines again, and he sat up. After gulping down some beer, he accepted a cigarette and lighted it.

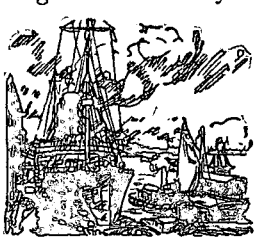
"You know that chap Garven—tall, bearded, tanned? Brought in that story from the hills that was in all the Rangoon papers last week?"

"Aye," said the purser curiously.

"Well, you have a nasty job to do for me. Will you?"

"For you as owner in chief of this bally steamship line," demanded the purser, "or for you yourself?"

"Damn the steamship line," said Manning. "For me myself, with the same old streamers that you're wearing on your manly chest."



"Old son, I'll do murder for you," said the purser. "Not for you as owner, mind! To hell with owners off duty. But you and me and that brother of yours—say, say now, I'd cut off my right hand to have him here with us over the beer! D'ye mind that night when the three of us was in the Gallipoli trench, and we had a bottle o' beer——"

"Shut up and listen to me," said Manning. "You're drunk this minute."

II

GARVEN had enjoyed a rubber of bridge and was about ready to turn in for the night, when the purser came into the nearly emptied smoking-room and flopped down into a chair beside Garven. The purser was drunk, obviously so. The row of campaign ribbons on his breast was always askew when he was drunk. He called for a drink, blinked at Garven, and then began to laugh.

"Old son, funniest thing happened tonight!" he said. "Funniest thing you ever heard. S'pose I shouldn't talk about it, but who cares? You're all right. Sparks told me 'bout it—poor kid, he'll have half the Calcutta police out to meet us! Excited, he is. You'n me are pals, what? Here's how, and many to come!"

Garven nodded, the glasses tinkled. The purser thirstily emptied his glass at a gulp. "What—oh, yes! Funniest thing ever.

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Here it is, now! Feller on board here who murdered some chap upcountry, understand? Shot him in the back or somewhere, robbed him. Then grew a beard, came down to Rangoon, and came aboard with the loot—funniest thing ever! Here's how!"

Garven gulped a little, lifted his glass mechanically. The purser cursed his own empty glass, noisily summoned the boy, and presently began to talk again.

"This feller—name was Ormsby, understand?—had a thing he took off the man he murdered. Don't understand myself. Something partic'lar, it was. Jade or something. And today or tonight, sometime, he got talking with somebody, and this other chap saw this thing, and popped on to the game, right-o! Police chap, this chap was, understand. Damned complicated thing to talk 'bout. Oh, yes! I remember now. Murdered man's name was Smithsend, and now the wireless is signallin' for the Calcutta police. Funny thing, wireless, when you stop to think 'bout it, now! I remember, one time back—where was it?—oh, yes, back in the old B. P. line. You know it, out o' the Australian ports——"

Garven, rising to his feet, walked away suddenly and was gone. The purser stared vacantly after him, then rose and also left the smoking-room, but with a surprisingly steady step.

When he had returned to his own cabin, the purser found Manning still there, quietly smoking.

"Did it, old son! Though for the life o' me I can't see just what your game is, lettin' on to that rotter you're a police chap."

A knock sounded at the door, and Sparks stepped in. The young wireless officer, who was new in the line, gave Manning one curious glance and then shoved back his cap and looked at the purser.

"See here, I just got in a message from Rangoon for a chap named Smithsend. No one of that name aboard the old hooker——"

The purser waved his hand genially toward Manning.

"Right here y'are. *Mister* Smithsend, Gawd save the mark! He owns most o' this ruddy steamship line, old son, and I've no respect for him at all. Devil a bit. But you'd best have plenty. Down under his placid exterior he has brains, somewhere."

"Shut up," said Manning, and looked at Sparks. "Where's that message?"

"Here, sir," said Sparks, awed into belief. He handed over the message and left the cabin. Manning spread out the slip on his knee, and at his invitation the purser crowded over to read the words:

"Smithsend, S. S. Hulagu. Little known of Garven here. Said come overland from Yunnan. Explorer. Rangoon Times."

"I sent the *Times* a request to look him up, this evening, but sent a personal call to the editor and only signed my first name," said Manning in explanation.

"Well, loosen up!" said the purser. "What's your game, now? If what you think is so, why not call in the police? Why give him warning? What's that jade thing?"

Manning smiled slightly. "You're venerable, bald-headed and senile. D'you remember the Taiping rebellion in China?"

"Heard tell of it. Why?"

"My grandfather was in it—a friend and adviser of the Taiping emperor. When my grandfather came home, the Taiping emperor gave him that jade seal; a small, private imperial seal for personal letters. Nothing like it could possibly exist in duplicate. My brother Bob carried it as a lucky token, also in case he got up into China and needed any help. Last letter I had from him, before digging off with Ormsby, he mentioned it. So this chap Garven lied about it. Nobody knows much what Ormsby looked like, but this thing gave his game away."

The purser whistled at this. "Bully! And you're wangling him on the strength of it. But look here, what d'you expect to get out of it? S'pose you and me go down there and arrest the blighter for the murder of your brother, what?"

"Cool down and open another bottle of beer," said Manning. "And shut off that electric fan. Being a purser and at one time a naval brigade officer, it's natural you should have no brains. We'll try and instruct you."

The purser shut off the buzzing electric fan, and sudden silence fell, broken only by the monotonous clang of the engines. In this silence the two men drank their beer, Manning complacent and alert, the purser sadly puzzled and wondering. Suddenly something jarred upon the night. A muffled vibration lifted through the ship. With an exclamation, the purser sprang to his feet.

"That's a shot, somewhere below."

"Exactly," said Manning coolly. "Also, that's the end of the story."

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THE CHALLENGE OF THE SNAKE

By MEIGS O. FROST

Author of "The Penance of the Marshes," "The Whip Discovers Art," etc.

WHERE THE LIGHTS OF STRANGE FIRES FLICKERED OVER THE "TREMBLING PRAIRIE" OF THE SOUTH COAST, THERE WAS IT GIVEN TO THE LITTLE PADRE TO PROVE THE COURAGE OF THE AGES

BLACK clouds hung thick in the southeast, as the Reverend Father Girault Duchassois brought the battered hull of the *St. Rita* to rest against the rough planks of the wharf at Pointe Huitre. St. John's Eve had come on after a stifling sunset. Through the banked blackness great jagged lines of lightning tore. The rumble of thunder rolled like a distant Congo drum. Over the sodden south coast of Louisiana the June night was closing down like the grip of a giant hand, sweating and sinister. Fever was abroad—the dreaded Yellow Jack. Hundreds lay stricken.

It was a night for staying close in cabins shuttered against the mosquito hordes on Point Huitre. Against that stinging torment of the dark the folk of the coast guarded themselves. Though in those days they gave no care to the bites of the deadlier mosquito that flew by day, the *Stegomyia fasciata,* whose gray-white, barred body was the carrier of the yellow death. Nightfall, however, always found them battened close. But there on the wharf, ignoring the singing clouds of insects, as the little mission-boat neared, stood a group of rough-clad folk.

Father Duchassois was weary with a day of sun-blistering travel, toil and nursing among white and black alike over his watery parish. But he called cheery greeting to them, as he recognized tanned faces darkly outlined in the gleam of his boat-lantern.

There was Antoine Paincourt, owner of luggers and keeper of the store at Pointe Huitre—father of Jacqueline Paincourt, beauty among the little priest's parishioners. There was young Perrin Desmare, to whom she was betrothed. There was old Bink Buckingham, godless reveller, allied to no church at all, guide, trapper, shrimper and oysterman, as the seasons ran. Behind them stood others of the little settlement whose towering pile of oyster-shells that gave it its name gleamed white and ghostly in the background.

"Bon soir, mes enfants," sounded the priest's greeting. There was cheer in it; for all the weariness he could not keep out of his voice. Death he had fought many times in many places—always face to face—always smiling into its visage.

"B'soir, Pere Girault," came their answer, but there was nothing of cheer in their mingled tones. Their voices matched the sinister night.

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Stern to bow with the *St. Rita,* saw Father Duchassois, floated the *Wild Horse,* workboat of Antoine Paincourt. His swift glance noted that her riding lights were extinguished—that the running lights, green to starboard and red to port, were lit. Through the open sliding side-door of her rough cabin his eye caught the gleam of light on blue metal, as the flame of the boat's lantern swinging from hook in the cabin roof reflected on the barrels of weapons that stood slanting against the wall.

The sun-wrinkles about the little priest's blue eyes deepened as his tanned face grew stern. The slight wiry figure that had been bowed with fatigue straightened beneath the rusty black cassock in whose sable girdle was thrust the heavy, carven brass crucifix of the Oblate Fathers.

Far north as the Great Slave Lake he had worn that uniform of his service, traveling his parishes there, fur-wrapped, on

dog-sleds from trading-post to trading-post, preaching in log hut and snow-banked chapel amid icy wastes.

Far south as the outlying settlements of the Louisiana coast he wore it now, in the same service, making his rounds in the sweltering mission-boat that was his floating church: a battered boat whose bow bore the double-barred archiepiscopal cross of its donor-prelate; whose cabin had known strange confessions; from whose deck the tiny portable tarpaulin-swathed organ had been carried for primitive music in masses said before a tiny portable altar reared beneath open sky on mudbank and shell-reef, on sodded levee and wave-washed *chenière.*

Rough folk, north and south alike, had known his ministrations. Rough folk indeed. But to him they were his children.

From the *St. Rita's* deck to the rough planks he leaped, confronting the little group.

"What do you want with rifle and shotgun in the face of storm like this?" he demanded.

It was Antoine Paincourt who answered.

"We hunt a devil, Père Girault," he said grimly. "Zombi Le Veau. He has gone into the deep swamp in his boat. Jacqueline, my little daughter, is with him. It is St. John's Eve."

St. John's Eve! Night of the year for Voudou revel and devil-worship. Night when the snake-god Gran' Zombi challenged the forces of good! Jacqueline! And with Zombi Le Veau, that sullen swarthy savage, mixture of strange breeds, who had mocked his ministration, whose strange hold over the blacks and breeds of the south coast gave rise to stranger tales!

No need to tell the little priest more.

Though his ancestors had fought in a New World against savage tribes for the Lilies of France, not one of them had swirled into swifter action. He asked no questions. That could wait.

"A drum of gasoline—quick, sluggards!" rang his order. "We go in the *St. Rita.* Two miles she travels to your boat's one, Antoine."

For a moment men moved swiftly on the splintery Pointe Huitre wharf. Over its edge to creaking deck rolled the metal gasoline-drum to fill the tank near-emptied by a day of travel. To that deck clattered the needle-pointed, paper-thin cypress pirogue of Bink Buckingham, lifted from the *Wild Horse's* cabin roof. Weapons were tossed on the narrow bunk where Father Duchassois slept beneath coarse blankets when night overtook him in far and winding bayous.

Then the thick, black bank of cloud to the southeast was ripped and slashed by the thrust of long and jagged blade. The gleam of that lightning-flash shone on black water, empty and eddying, where a moment before the *St. Rita* had rested at mooring. To the push of spinning propeller, the little mission-boat was on her way into the pathless reaches of the deep swamp.

"TO RIBAULT *Chenière,* Antoine?" Father Duchassois had questioned, knowing that the question was needless. Old Antoine Paincourt nodded in silence. Both knew that up-thrust outcrop of a clay ridge, shell-mound-crested, miles into the swamp, where ancient live-oaks stood squat and twisted, draped with their thick beards of Spanish moss. It was there if anywhere they would find the girl they sought. For there, ran sinister south coast report, was the scene of the voudou orgies, knowledge of which no man would admit—least of all, the swamp blacks. But in the strength of the magic brewed there, the current of under-surface talk of the coast showed full belief.

"Take the wheel, my son," said Father Duchassois to young Perrin Desmare.

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Then to old Antoine, "Come below with me."

In the little cabin-confessional where so often the troubles of his people had been poured into his ears, he seated himself on the edge of the berth, waving Antoine to the only chair.

"How came Jacqueline to go into that swamp with that beast of a Zombi Le Veau?" he asked sharply.

The father's face was bitter with wrath. "A woman's reason!" growled the old man. "Name of a Name! She thinks, the *sacré* young fool, she is sacrificing herself to save the coast from the fever."

"What!" The note of a war-trumpet sounded in the little priest's voice. "Jacqueline? She holds traffic with Voudou? Do you know what you speak, Antoine?"

"Too well, and too late, came the grim and sorrowful answer. "But not too late to kill in vengeance. Had her mother talked before I left with my shrimp-luggers a week ago, I could have slain the *sacré sauvage* then, and we would not be here tonight. But her mother thought she could control her—she feared my anger, she said today—she told me nothing till I returned this evening."

The sun-tanned brow of Father Duchassois was knotted in wrinkles of puzzlement.

"But Jacqueline!" he said. "Not yet do I understand. She and Zombi Le Veau! How did this begin?"

"With a love-quarrel between her and young Perrin Desmare," came the acrid words of the old man. "How do most young girls' imbecilities begin save through quarrels with their betrothed? All this she told her mother only yesterday. And I was not there! Splendor of God!" he swore in anguish. "And I was not there! Mere Angele, she did not believe that the girl would go, Girault. That much to her credit. I doubt I would have believed myself, had she told me."

"A love-quarrel, you said?" Father Duchassois's keen mind was racing, but there were wide gaps yet to bridge.

"Months ago it began, that idiot quarrel, after the dance at Boulou Lafont's hall at *Chenière* Crevette," the old man explained in the racing Cajun argot. "Young Perrin, his skin full of *vin rouge*, like the other young fools, he danced that night with many. But much with Armaid Chighizola. Hot words he and Jacqueline gave one another, after the manner of children. In the morning he sailed with the shrimp fleet. Jacqueline like the young fool she is, wept night on night, thereafter. Then she placed silver in the hand

of that accursed Tante Melancon. For some magic powder of love that would bring him back to her, *comprehends?* The young imbecile! And Tante Melancon, be sure, is nothing if she be not the creature of Zombi Le Veau."

A momentary picture of the old swamp negress, stooped, wizened of face, her agate-like animal eyes gleaming beneath the vivid colors of her bright turban, flashed before the little priest's brain. In a shack she dwelt near Pointe Huitre. Fortunes with thumbed and greasy cards, with readings of the palm, with peerings into the viscera of new-slain and knife-split chickens—by these she had drawn crossings of palms with silver from the youth of the coast, he knew. But of Voudou traffickings that would bring young Jacqueline Paincourt within the grip of Zombi Le Veau! He had underestimated, disregarded the old woman's malignancy and power. He shrugged shoulders beneath the black cassock. Strange things the swamp had taught him. Stranger things, apparently, it had yet to teach.

"There is more to tell, Antoine," he said.

"There is indeed," the old man's hoarse voice affirmed. "Name of a Name, but there is more!"

He scowled blackly. "Day after day, I find, Tante Melancon plays with my little girl as cat plays with mouse. Love powders and little crossed sticks and waxen images! And always more money for stronger charms. But Perrin Desmare does not come. *Sacrée tonnerre de dieu!* How can he come? Is he not in the Gulf, then, off Timbalier, working on the big seine of a shrimp lugger? These girls sick with love!

"So Tante Melancon, she must make greater Voudou yet, she tells Jacqueline. That of a surety will bring back her lover. By then I think the girl was mad. And that witch of hell reveals to her that the king of all Voudou on the coast—*le vrai roi*—he has consented to help her. Who, thinks you? Yes, indeed. Zombi Le Veau!"

"Ah!" The gaps were bridged now in

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the mind of Father Duchassois. All but one.

"Truly the child was close to madness," he said, pityingly. "But how did they plant belief that she must sacrifice herself to drive the fever from the coast?"

Antoine Paincourt spoke swiftly as the *St. Rita* drove on in the dark. "In the cabin of that accursed Tante Melancon they met, Zombi Le Veau and my little girl," he said, deep in his throat. "All this, Pere Duchassois, she told her mother and her mother, me. That *sauvage,* he tells her that she must bring Perrin Desmare close to the gates of death to win him back to life and her arms. Ah, the *diablerie* to which they pledged her! *Le signe de la mort!* The mark of death!"

"Le signe de la mort?" questioned Father Girault.

"It was a piece of board made black with tar, Pere Girault," said the girl's father with a blasting curse at the deadly mummery. "Spotted with the grease of candle-drippings. On all four corners, candles of wax stuck in their own grease. Pins around the edges, as one places fence-posts. And in the center, formed of tar, a little coffin. In the coffin, a small waxen image. And in the breast of the image, a gilded mimosa thorn barely thrust so that it stood upright."

Ominously glittered the blue eyes of Father Duchassois. This in his parish!

"Go on, Antoine!" he commanded. "Go on."

"C'est incroyable, Pere Girault," said the old man hoarsely. "Could I believe it, had she not told her mother, and her mother, me? *Jamais de la vie!* Each day she was to press that gilded thorn a little deeper in the breast of that accursed figure of wax. Pains would strike at the heart of Perrin Desmare. He would come back to her. Dying. She would draw out the thorn. He would be well again—and hers. That pitiful girl; she was in their hands by then."

In the eyes of the little priest who listened, there shone clear and steady flame.

"And then, Antoine?"

"One night only my girl pressed in that thorn. It seemed to pierce her own heart, she told her mother. The accursed thing she took and threw in the fire, sprinkling on it holy water from the little shell by her *Prie dieu* and crossing herself lest the devil spring forth and seize her. Next day she went to the cabin of Tante Melancon and told what she had done. She would tell both you, Pere Girault, and young Perrin Desmare, of their unholy work, she said. That was the day, you see, old Pierre Tournelle was stricken by the fever. Then his wife died. Then their children. And the fever spread, as all men know.

"Then it was that Tante Melancon came shuffling up to Jacqueline one day to give Zombi Le Veau's message. Know you that message, Pere Girault? For her defiance, Zombi Le Veau through Voudou had sent the fever to the south coast. Her mother was to die. I, her father, was to die. Perrin Desmare was to die. There was but one way, said Tante Melancon, that the curse could be lifted. On St. John's Eve she must bow before the altar of Gran' Zombi, the Voudou snake-god from which Zombi Le Veau takes his name. Then the fever would leave the coast.

"Night after night the girl prayed, her mother told me, Pere Girault. Cold fear was paralyzing her brain. Today she boarded Zombi Le Veau's boat down by Tante Melancon's shack. They went into the heart of the deep swamp. Children playing by the bank saw them leave, and told us. She is there, now, in his hands. There is no more to tell."

Chill was the light in the eyes of the little priest as the old man's voice trailed into silence. Grim the lines about his sun-tanned face. He looked at the round brass clock ticking on the cabin wall.

"From all that I have heard," he said quietly, "it is midnight at least before the Voudou rites grow uncontrolled. We will be at Ribault *Chenière* an hour before then."

"We can't be there any too quick, padre."

It was the voice of old Bink Buckingham, who stood framed in the little companionway.

"An' don't make no mistake, padre," he added calmly. "There'll be hell a-poppin' 'fore we get outa there, or I done made a bad bust sizin' up that Zombi feller."

He stepped to the narrow berth. From its rough gray blanket he raised a heavy weapon he had tossed there in the swift transfer from the *Wild Horse.*

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"Got any gun-oil aboard, padre?" he asked, unconcernedly. "I ain't used this baby for a long time. She sure needs t' have her innards greased."

THROUGH black and winding bayous the *St. Rita* drove.

Not yet was time for caution. Speed—speed—speed was all of which to think for miles to come. Starboard and port loomed the black wall of the cypress forest, its beard of Spanish moss dripping dankly. Then through narrow channel the prow of the little mission-boat would tear into broad waterway edged by level reaches of the trembling prairie—quivering, oozy depths of slime and heights of growth too thick for pirogue to pierce, too soft to uphold the feet even of the trained marsh-walker. None but men who followed trap-line through the years from boyhood, to whom that course was more a matter of instinct than the vision of eyes straining through the darkness, could have sped on their way as those who drove the *St. Rita* that night.

It was raining now. Slanting sheets of water lashed their faces, while above and around them the thunder-salvoes crashed and reverberated; while the insane thrusting of the lightning, like the giant blade of some celestial swordsman fighting desperately in mid-mêlée, laced the blackness with patterns of crackling flame.

Through it all the *St. Rita* ploughed unceasing. Steady the throb of her racing motor, nursed by the little priest who on long and weary voyaging was his own skipper and engineer. The minute-hand of the round brass clock in the cabin was circling, tick by tick. They must reach Ribault *Chenière* before midnight, they knew.

Hours it seemed to them they drove endlessly on. There was no talk among them, now. Each man knew what he faced. Each man knew what he feared. Young Perrin Desmare held to the wheel. On deck beside him Pere Girault and old Antoine stood staring into the sluicing dark. Alone in the little cabin, the old guide labored with oil and cloth on the strange and heavy weapon. He hummed a profane and ancient song of the trap-lines as he worked.

It was the voice of young Perrin Desmare that broke the silence following a volley of rolling thunder of the south coast storm. They had surged around a bend, out from behind a high barrier of roseau-cane. To the reach of the young man's hand the little searchlight of the *St. Rita* winked out; the motor was throttled to half-sped.

"Pere Girault," he called, his voice quivering with an agony of youthful impatience. "That black ridge over the marsh to starboard—that is Ribault *Chenière.*"

Eyes strained through the dark, now. The *St. Rita,* the drone of her motor hardly to be heard on her own deck above crashing thunder-peal and rush of rain, crept along a twisting channel. The little group, drenched on the sluicing deck, had found what they sought. Like fireflies in the distance over the level marsh, twinkled the fitful flame of pine-knot fires kindled beneath small shelters of palm thatch.

Black above those fires, even against the night-time starless sky, bulked the mass of squat and twisted liveoaks from which Ribault *Chenière* took its name.

Dark against those fires moved tiny forms in the distance, seen in sable silhouette.

Then it was that Father Duchassois took command.

Silent and dark the *St. Rita* lay on the bayou bank. The little priest, his cassock covered by a huge oilskin cloak, his head bare, hauled upon the rope astern until the skiff surged alongside. He leaped into its stern-seat, gripped the rail of the *St. Rita* to steady the small craft.

"Not a shot unless I command, *mes enfants,*" he ordered crisply. "Too much talk of slaying have I heard. We come to rescue Jacqueline now, not to seek vengeance. Your promise?"

Growlingly Antoine and young Perrin gave pledge as they stepped overside into the skiff, weapons in hand.

Antoine looked around. "But where is that *sacré* Bink?" he asked.

Certainly he was not in the skiff. Back over the *St. Rita's* thwart scrambled Father Duchassois. Cabin and deck alike he found empty. From the blankets on the berth had vanished the heavy rifle the old trapper had oiled so carefully. From the deck the pirogue was missing.

While they had been busied with the skiff, he had slipped that toothpick of a cypress dugout soundlessly over the side, and paddled silently off into the dark.

A moment Father Duchassois stood, brow knit in perplexity.

"He leaves us nothing else to do," he said. "We must go on without him."

Without creak of greased oarlock or splash of blade, the skiff swept noiselessly on toward the *chenière.*

Crouched in the stern beneath the lash

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of the driving rain, Father Duchassois was wondering mutely what plan had been in the old guide's mind.

PIROGUE and skiff, square-ended john-boat and the lone gasoline launch of Zombi Le Veau, lay moored in a cluttered jumble on the shore of Ribault *Chenière*. The flickering, leaping flame of pine-knot fires beneath tiny thatches gleamed back from water black as ink with the rotting swamp vegetation. From miles afar the swamp blacks and breeds had gathered to the call of the Voudou leader.

Zombi Le Veau! It was a name with which to conjure among the illiterate descendants of those who had heard whispered tales of Gran' Zombi, the snake-god, from their earliest childhood; to whom the name of Marie Le Veau, long Louisiana's Voudou queen, reigning in her cabin on the outskirts of New Orleans with Alexander, gigantic half-breed Indian, as consort and partner, was a shibboleth of mystic horror.

Out of the heart of the Congo had come those tales and traditions and evil rites, embellished and degenerated, if degeneration were possible, in Hayti and Santo Domingo. Driven from New Orleans in a spasm of police reform, they had found their resting place in the swamps of South Louisiana—a whispered litany of terror and deadly power passed on from mouth to mouth.

Apart from the terror of foul rites, there was very real foundation for the fear of Voudou. Knowledge of strange vegetable poisons, swamp-brewed, had passed from generation to generation. There were times when the snake-god struck.

And the swart giant of a breed who had taken the name of Zombi Le Veau in the south coast swamps, had used it to strange and dimly-guessed ends. His power had grown, silent and malignant. Now he was drunk with it.

There on Ribault *Chenière*, in the heart of the deep swamp where few penetrated, stood the temple his following had reared, bulking beneath the dripping liveoaks. Rough trunks of small trees formed its four corners. Rough saplings braced the roof. Thatched with the scrubby latanier palm were roof and walls through whose chinks now shone gleams of light. There were no windows in the shaggy surface of the walls. One opening, doorless, screened by a blanket, gave entrance.

Empty gombo buckets and blackened coffee-pots, strewn carelessly beside the embers of the dying fires beneath their palm thatches along the shore, showed that the feast had ended, as Father Duchassois and his two companions in the skiff edged along the *chenière* in the darkness. By a mass of undergrowth they landed. Lightly the painter was looped to a mangrove root. Silent-footed, keeping in the shade of the spreading oaks, they inched their way toward the walls of the Voudou temple.

Not a guard was outside. Far in the deep swamp the worshippers had deemed sentry needless.

Out from the lantern-lighted room was surging the age-old throb of the Congo drum. Eyes to chinks, the little priest and the two with him peered in upon a scene such as the jungle knew before the new world dawned upon the old world's ken.

Squatted against the wall across from them sat the musicians.

"A présent commencez!" intoned its leader.

Weird minor cadences rose and fell as bow scraped two-stringed fiddle, long-necked, its body a scant three inches across, its covering a mottled snake-skin. The accompaniment of that weird and wavering note was the steady, rhythmic throb of little drums of gourd, across which sheepskin was stretched. Some beat those drums in steady cadence with their thumbs in the ancient tribal way. Others gave a swift double-beat with the smoothed ends of the whitened jaw-bone of the wild boar. Out from those gourds poured the throbbing volume of sound, surging in eerie waves through the lashing of the rain.

One glance at the squatting musicians showed Father Duchassois that the girl they sought was not there. His eyes, close to the chink in the rough and spiky palm-leaves, searched the room inch by inch. Then he clenched his lean jaw to repress an exclamation.

There stood Jacqueline Paincourt, white-faced, white-robed, in coarse cotton cloth roughly draped about her dress. By the

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far end of the room she stood, crouched with staring eyes beside a rough seat of planks that served as throne, and on that throne sat Tante Melancon.

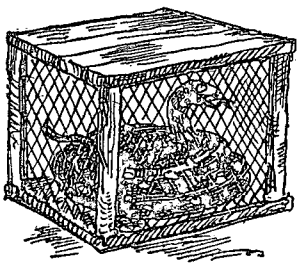
The stooped and wrinkled denizen of the sagging shack by Point Huitre was transformed. Bright scarlet the turban that wrapped her head; bright scarlet the robe that clad her wizened body. But the shuffling stoop was gone. Proudly she sat erect, as one who rules. The glitter in her agate eyes boded ill for those who dared oppose that rule.

Before her, in mid-room, Father Duchassois saw for the first time the Voudou altar. A white table-cloth was spread flat upon the pounded earthen floor. On each corner, held in a little mound of its own melted grease, burned a tall candle. The flickering, wavering flames cast weird light upon that strange array of altar decorations.

In the center stood a flat and woven basket filled with small tufts of fragrant *herbes*. Rosemary and sweet basil, rose geranium and crumbled rose-leaves intermingled with a scattering of cloves. Around the basket were piled little mounds of white beans and corn. Circling them as an outer barrier were tiny piles of small white bones like the finger-bones of children. Out beyond them, curiously-twisted bunches of feathers lay, tied with bright silks. And outside of all, on the outer edges of the tablecloth, piles of small cakes were heaped.

But between that altar and the plank bench where sat the Voudou queen enthroned, was a sight that sent a shiver down the spine of the little priest.

Weaving and coiling in a square box whose top and bottom were solid wood braced with wooden posts at the corners, but whose sides were chicken-wire mesh, Father Duchassois glimpsed the folds of a snake. Thick as a strong man's arm, its body, bluish black in the light of candle and lantern, mottled with greenish yellow spots.



With swift recollection his mind flashed back to Antoine's description of the diabolic thing Zombi Le Veau and Tante Melancon had given Jacqueline. A board black with tar and splashed with the drippings of candle-grease. The symbolism of the snake-skin!

Full six feet long the reptile seemed. From time to time its flat head darted through the opening in the chicken-wire mesh—its forked tongue flashing forth. And close by, tethered by cord from foot to small stake driven in the ground, was a snow-white cock. Beneath the crimson comb its filmed eyes stared fascinated at the snake.

The lips of the little priest moved in silent prayer. He was on the firing line of his service now, in the enemy's country indeed.

SHRILLER and shriller rose the cadence of the snake-skin fiddle, scraped now by a frantic bow. Higher sounded the throb of the gourd drums. The seated rows of worshippers along the wall swayed to the rhythmic surges of sound.

"A présent commencez!" rang again the call.

Then Father Duchassois, for the first time that night, saw Zombi Le Veau.

The tall and sinewy form, rippling with snaky muscle, stepped forth from a corner of the room that from his position the little priest had been unable to bring within the range of his limited field of vision.

Slowly his body began to sway to the surge of the music. From his parted lips came forth the low rumble of a chant. It rose, louder and louder.

It was an hour of triumph for Zombi Le Veau. The culmination of hidden and obscene ambitions seemed near.

The watchers outside the palm-thatched wall could hear the words now, rolling, deep-throated, rhythmic with the swinging, slurring Cajun argot of their phrasing.

It was the old, old chant of the Louisiana Voudou.

"Mallé couri dan déser.
Mallé marché dan savanne!
Mallé marché su piquan doré.
Mallé oir ça ya di moin!"

Mechanically the little priest listened to the Voudou song of defiance, his eyes upon the white-robed girl close by the throne of the Voudou queen, as before them Zombi Le Veau leaped and writhed.

"I go forth into the desert—I march across the prairie—I tread upon the Thorn of Gold—I go where I will. Who is there to say me nay?"

"The Thorn of Gold," breathed the little priest. The gilded mimosa thorn in

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the breast of a little waxen image flashed before his eyes. *Le signe de la mort!* This savage was defying death!

Up to the throne where sat Tante Melancon rushed the dancer with stamping steps. Before her he halted with arms outthrust. From her scarlet robe she drew forth a flask of dried gourd, stoppered with a wooden plug. Lifting it high, Zombi Le Veau drank. His cheeks bulged as he handed back the flask. The skinny arm of the queen shot out, handing him a length of candle.

Leaping like a fiend in the jungle steps of his dance, the giant breed retreated to the altar. From one of its candles, he lit the taper in his hand. It flamed high.

Out in front of his face he held the candle. From his pursed lips shot a fine spray, straight at the flame. It must have been clear alcohol, the priest thought, as he saw it flare into a burst of light.

A shuddering "A-a-a-ahhh!" sounded from the swaying lines of worshippers.

Wilder sounded the burst of notes from the snake-skin fiddle. Louder the throb of gourd drums, as thumbs and boar-jaws beat a frantic tattoo.

Higher rose the barbaric chant.

"Sangé moin l'abitation ci la la.
Mo gagnain soutchien la Louisiane.
Mallé oir ça ya di moin!
MALLE OIR CA YA DI MOIN!"

Defiance? This was frenzied, bestial challenge!

"Who shall drive me from my abiding place? Back of me stands all Louisiana! Who is there to say me nay? Who is there can resist me?"

The challenge of the snake!

Never did heart of armored knight leap higher as he clamped his visor clanging down, set lance in rest and drove home his golden spurs to meet the champion of Saracen host riding far out in front of bannered ranks in challenge, than leaped the heart of Father Girault Duchassois. Nothing he recked of numbers, that moment. Nothing of the swaying ranks of frenzied worshippers. Forgotten was all else than this.

On swift feet he circled the corner of the building. With a shout he dashed the blanket-barrier aside and sprang through the doorway. Torn from its fastenings, the blanket fell to earth behind him.

"*'Mallé oir ça ya di moin?'* you ask?" rang his voice, high above the maniac shriek of snake-skin fiddle, high above the Congo throb of gourd drums. "Who is there to say you nay? Who can resist you? I am here! By this I challenge you!"

Out from his sable girdle flashed the crucifix of shining brass. High he held it, gleaming in the light of raftered lanterns, casting back the glitter of candle-flame of the obscene altar at his feet.

Right and left his feet lashed out. Scattered afar whirled the basket of *herbes*, the piles of beans and corn, the bones and feathers and the little cakes. One wrench and the white cock was freed, to flutter squawking through the open door. One heave, and the writhing king-snake, cage and all, shot into the night.

Erect in the center of the trodden earthen floor stood the little black-robed figure, the brass cross again raised high.

"Back to your homes and camps, children of shame!" he ordered in their own argot. He wheeled upon the king. "*'Mo gagnain soutchien la Louisiane?'* do you say? Back of you stands all Louisiana? Ha! Back of you stands the cell and the gallows, if half I hear of you be true, Zombi Le Veau! For the sake of those you lead astray it is for me to put you there!"

The swaying of the worshippers that lined the walls of the jungle temple had ceased. Frozen, immobile as a row of squatting statues, they sat. The music had died. Eyes fearful, eyes wondering, eyes resentful, eyes murky with rage, looked questioning into the face of Zombi Le Veau.

His back to the throne where sat Tante Melancon, proudly erect no more, shriveled and hunched beneath the scarlet turban, his face to the little priest, stood the Voudou king. His swarthy visage was working convulsively. His long arms, cable-thewed, hung at his sides. The muscular fingers that had been shaking with the passion of his frenzied dance, opened laxly. Then, slowly, they curved as claws curve. The giant shoulders tensed snakily. The knees bent slightly.

Strange tableau they made, standing there in the eerie light—the little priest with brazen crucifix held high, the great breed gathering for the spring.

It was death that Father Girault read in those murky eyes glowering upon him. Yet never a word came from his lips to summon the two he knew stood outside the flimsy thatch of wall, weapons poised to fire. No man could tell how this would end—this sinister climax to his impetuous dash. Not for him to voice the call that

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laid the burden of blood upon another's soul.

Yet strangely he felt no fear. The blood of long-dead generations of men who had fought for France in savage lands sang thrillingly through his throbbing veins. His wiry arm swung back slightly. The crucifix of brass, heavy, gleaming in the light, was no mean weapon even for a fighting man.

Outside, the whole black arch of the heavens was split by crackling flame. Winding channel of black water, oozy reach of prairie, dripping tangle of cypress swamp and oak-grown *chenière* stood for a breathless second sharply revealed. Then the whole world seemed to shake with the rolling reverberations of the thunder.

Zombi Le Veau crouched to leap. The great muscles bunched, the lips of the bestial face writhed, flecked with touches of foam.

"Mallé oir ça ya di moin!" he shrieked, and launched his spring.

Never an inch the little priest gave ground. An arc of fire glittered in the room as the heavy crucifix swung backward—forward—but in mid-air it stopped at the crest of the swing. No blow was struck.

The giant form of Zombi Le Veau had crumpled, whirled, and slumped to the floor of trodden earth his bare feet had spurned in their jungle dance. His great limbs twitched with the agony of struggle. To his side he rolled, fought horribly to gain his feet once more, and then soundlessly he sprawled upon his back.

The eyes that followed him gazed, appalled. Not a mark showed upon his face—upon the barrel-like chest stripped to the waist. Not a blow had been struck. Yet there he lay, stricken at the surging height of his beastly power.

Far off on the horizon the last reverberations of the thunder rumbled into silence. The rush of driving rain against the palm thatch alone sounded in the room.

Stark horror reflected in the faces that lined the wall. Incredulity, superstitious fear, struggled in stricken countenances.

Wonder was in the heart of Father Duchassois, but none showed in his face. Swiftly he took advantage of that dazing moment. Dramatic his deed, but he knew his audience.

"Gloria in excelsis Deo!" rang his measured Latin chant.

Slowly he stepped forward, the cross of brass raised high. Up to the rough plank throne where Tante Melancon cowered. An arm he laid protectingly about the shoulders of Jacqueline Paincourt.

"Come with me, my daughter," he commanded.

Unhurried, majestic in his flowing black cassock, the cross still held on high, he led her from the room.

Not a hand was raised to bar the way.

Down across the bucket-strewn beach, past the blackened embers of rain-drenched fires, through the wet brush to the mangroves where the skiff lay moored, they made their way. There was no need to call Antoine and Perrin, he knew. Scarce had he stepped aboard the skiff before they slipped through the brush and joined him. Sinewy arms sped the little craft down the twisting channel to where the *St. Rita* awaited, silent and dark.

In the whirling mind of Father Duchassois, as he sat on the stern-seat with the shivering girl beside him, was mingled now with wonder at what had become of Bink Buckingham, the wonder at what had stricken Zombi Le Veau in mid-leap, at the crest of his power.

LIGHTS flashed out on the *St. Rita.* The motor awoke to life as the roughened hands of the little priest spun the wheel.

"Now," he said, as the craft surged forward, "we go back and circle the *chenière* to find our comrade. There is little danger they will try to board us, after what has happened. If they do—" He shrugged drenched and expressive shoulders beneath his clinging cassock. What might not this wild night yet bring forth!

"Can't find anything that ain't lost, padre," sounded a hoarse voice alongside, in the dark.

Into the ring of light shot a swift pirogue. A scarred, rough old hand grasped the thwart of the *St. Rita.* The motor died.

"Look back at Peaceful Island, padre," invited Bink Buckingham. "I had one monkey an' parrot time findin' a dry place in that thatch, but she sure as hell got started before I left."

They wheeled and peered across the

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marsh. Dull red they saw at first, and then the whole wall of the jungle temple to windward, where the slanting lash of the rain had not reached, burst into bright flame. Huddled about it, still dazed and cowering, forms in black silhouette could be seen.

"Lend a hand, somebody," called the old guide. From the pirogue he handed up the heavy weapon he had borne off so silently in the dark. Springily for all his years, he leaped on deck. In one hand was the mooring line. He hauled the light craft up behind him, laid it tenderly on the deck, turned and took his cherished weapon from the hands of old Antoine Paincourt.

Questions were flooding to Father Duchassois's lips. But they were answered before they were asked.

"I kinda figgered you'd try some sorta fool stunt 'bout keepin' folks from shootin', padre," grinned the swamp veteran. "That's why I lit out. I was sittin' in this pirogue t'other side your gasoline navy here, when you make Antoine an' Perrin take a peace pledge. So I just nat'ch'lly took the warpath on my lonesome. Dam' good thing I did it, too, padre."

"Then it was you who struck him down?" Father Duchassois's brow knit in puzzlement as he looked at man and weapon. "But I heard no shot."

The old guide grinned.

"I sure never did reckon this baby'd come in so handy," he said casually. "Remember that bird-collector feller I guided 'round the swamps coupla years back, padre? Gave it to me when he left. He kinda liked it 'cause it didn't scare eve'thing a mile 'round when he killed a specimen with it. One o' them English air-rifles. Punch a hole through an inch o' pine board at fifty yards. And she sure don't talk loud, padre. Say, when I popped that Zombi feller in the back of the head through a hole in that thatch, the muzzle warn't ten feet from ol' Tante Melancon's ear, an' she never even heard it above the thunder."

The wrinkles in the brow of the little priest had cleared, but his eyes were sad.

"Bink, my son, you are not one of my own," he said, "but there is blood upon your hands through my rashness. Penance is mine for long weeks to come that in the pride of combat I forgot myself—even my holy office."

"Shucks, padre," grumbled Bink the irreverent. "I'd a-liked t' let you brain that big breed, but he was my meat ever since my ol' partner got killed on our trap-line last year. Never could hang it on that feller in court, but I knew who did it, all right. Just a-waitin' for him, padre. Tonight was my night. An' anyways, that weapon o' yours looked mighty light t' me."

From his girdle Father Duchassois drew out the crucifix of brass. A moment he glanced at it. The spell of the scene through which he had swirled so brief a space before was still upon him.

"There is no greater weapon, in this world or the next," he said proudly, and then with an access of humility he spoke again. "But I would have used it wrongly. *Mea culpa. Peccavi.* I have sinned, old friend."

The godless old trapper grinned slyly.

In many a fantastic argument he had clashed with the little priest.

"You done christened this boat the *St. Rita,* didn't you, padre," he chuckled. "An' you done told me she's the Saint of the Impossible. Think it over. There ain't nothin' more impossible in this world than keepin' a good fightin' man outa a good fight."

Father Duchassois shrugged again. He knew the hopelessness or argument with Bink Buckingham.

"You belong to the *St. Rita,* Binks, my son," he smiled affectionately, with a flash of the wit that the salons of Paris had known in his youth before he departed to study for the priesthood that had brought him into a swampy wilderness. "She is indeed the saint of the impossible. And you're the most impossible person I know."

The motor that had died to silence at the old trapper's hail, spun to life once more.

"Hola, Perrin," called the little priest. "Take the wheel while I go below to fix a place for Jacqueline."

But neither Perrin Desmare nor Jacqueline Paincourt heard his call. Forward in the shadow of the deck-house they stood, her head buried in his drenched shoulder, their arms clasped tightly about each other.

Pere Girault looked at the old trapper and winked. "I guess maybe you'd better take the wheel yourself, Bink, my son," he chuckled.

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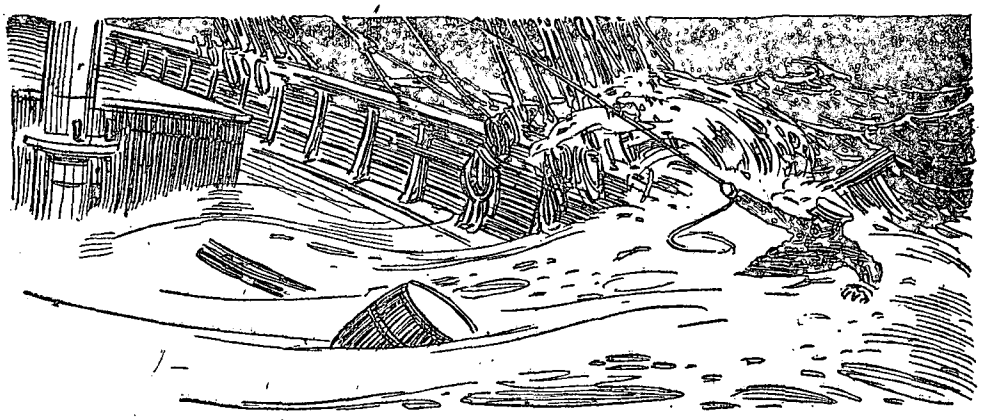

THE HOODOO ON THE *SARA BURNS*

By MAGRUDER MAURY

Author of "The Seven Pearls of Shandi," "The Devil of Panlang," etc.

STRANGE ADVENTURES LAY IN WAIT FOR THE YOUNG MAN WHO ACCEPTED A BERTH AS MATE ABOARD THE "SARA BURNS," ONE OF THE VAGUE SHADOW SHIPS OF THE ATLANTIC SEABOARD.

DICK WHITNEY lifted his dripping head from the wash-bowl and reached for the roller towel that swung to and fro with the heave of the ship. A grin crinkled the corners of his broad mouth as he rubbed the soap out of his eyes and caught sight of his tanned face in the mirror. It was a grin of good fellowship. He thought he had done pretty well for himself.

Two hours before he had been broke and "on the beach" at San Jacinto, dirty little Cuba shipping port. Then his own good luck, in the person of Señor Pedro, commission merchant, had snatched him up, and here he was, first mate on the skysail yarder, *Sara Burns,* bound for New York with twenty-seven thousand bags of raw sugar under her hatches.

Certainly he had done pretty well for himself.

He got into a clean, but much worn shirt, buckled his frayed leather belt snugly above his narrow hips, and lifted a sinewy hand to douse the swinging overhead lamp. With hand outstretched, a quizzical pucker between his gray eyes, he sniffed the air as a pointer dog sniffs at the trail.

Mingled with the reek of raw sugar that came up to him from between decks was the unmistakable odor of burning opium.

"Smells like Gay Street in Hong Kong on a wet night," he muttered, forgetting to douse the light.

Outside his door, in the alleyway, there was the sound of shuffling feet, followed by a sullen thump. Drawing a deep lung full of the breeze that came through the open port, he flung open the door into the alleyway.

Sprawled against the opposite bulkhead, full in the path of light from the swinging overhead lamp in Dick's berth, was a Chinese coolie, into whose half-naked chest a broad-bladed knife had been thrust up to the wooden handle. The body was still twitching.

A door slammed at the farther end of the alleyway opening into the cuddy. Dick started, as if he were responsible for the ugly thing at his feet.

"Oh, Captain!" he called. "Captain Newcomb!"

The cuddy door swung open and the voice of the captain of the *Sara Burns* rumbled out.

"What the hell? What's up?" Then, seeing the first mate, "What are you doing here? What do you want?"

"There's a dead man here," Dick announced.

Even as he spoke to his captain, that officer's bulky form was thrust aside by a

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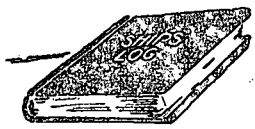
slender, youngish woman, who, although she did not move from the stand she had taken in the cuddy door, seemed to take the situation completely in hand.

"It's Kim," she said to Dick. "Our mess steward." And then to the captain, "I told you not to rag that boy so much, Cap'n Newcomb. You scared him, and now he's killed himself."

The captain opened his mouth in surprise, or it may have been anger, but said nothing, and the woman went on, her thin voice a shrill whisper in the confines of the narrow passage.

"We must get the body over the side before the men find out, or we'll have trouble. Sailors are a superstitious lot at best, and we've anything but the best for'ard."



"But," objected Dick, "we'll have to log this thing, and we——"

"The sailors won't see the log if we're careful," the woman interrupted, "but we'll have to hurry. You take his head, and, Captain Newcomb, you take his feet. We'll slip Mr. Chinaman through the stern window."

The utter callousness of the order, after the announcement that the dead man had been the ship's mess steward, struck Dick as anything but pleasant.

"I don't like—" he began again. But this time he was interrupted by the captain.

"Never mind what you like, Mister," he said, gruffly. "We'll do as my wife says. We can't take no chances with that rotten bunch for'ard. Bear a hand, will ye, and let's get the job over."

Then, without more ado, they lifted the body, the knife still in it, bore it to the stern window and slid it into the bubbling wake, where it bobbed for a second in the sheen of the foam—and vanished.

Dick's forehead was covered with beads of sweat when the job was finished, and the fat captain, panting from his exertion, although the dead coolie had not been a big man, sat down heavily beside the table.

"Fetch a pot o' that rum, Mrs. Newcomb," he demanded. "We need a drink before we eat."

With the warm glow of the rum in his blood, the mate felt decidedly more comfortable and began to take stock of his surroundings.

Like everything else he had seen aboard the *Sara Burns*, the supper table, with its white dishes against the red cloth, was scrupulously neat. He wondered, as he looked at the carefully laid plates, the shining prongs of the steel forks beside the plates, and the old-fashioned castor holding oil, vinegar, salt and pepper in the exact center of the table, if the dragging yellow hands he had helped to slide through the stern window had just touched them.

The thought renewed his sense of guilt, and he turned his attention to the woman who had superintended the job.

To his surprise, he saw that she was very good looking, almost beautiful. She was tall, but her figure was firmly rounded, and when she moved to the lift of the ship over the slight swell, she swayed like a young willow in a breeze. Her lips were thin, and tightly closed, but her chin was soft and dimpled. Her face was in profile. He wondered what her eyes were like.

She turned and faced him.

"Sit down," she said, pleasantly enough. "I shall have to fetch in the supper."

He saw then that her eyes were large and liquid brown. Around the iris was a yellow rim. They were beautiful eyes in shape and color, but that circle of yellow around the iris gave them a curiously feline look.

The captain was grotesquely fat, but under the fat lay great, swelling muscles. His face was round and red, and in the exact center a tiny blob of a nose was stuck. It was as red as the wattle of an angry turkey, and looked comically out of place in the vast expanse of cheek and upper lip.

Passing over the funny little nose, the most noticeable thing about the captain was his attitude toward his wife. Except for his demand for rum, he spoke, in her presence, only to echo or confirm whatever she said, and his little pale blue eyes seemed to follow her every move. When she left the table, as she did two or three times during the meal, he stopped whatever he happened to be saying as she came back into the cuddy. By the time supper was over Dick had decided that the captain of the *Sara Burns* was very much afraid of his wife.

The moon had risen when Dick went on deck to relieve Chips, the carpenter who was acting as second mate. The wind had shifted and freshened, and Chips had shaken out some of her kites, and the *Sara Burns* was dancing over the rising sea with an acre or more of white water to leeward.

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Chips, in a hurry for his supper, turned over the watch with only a word.

The rigging and gear were singing a shrill-voiced song that was music to Dick's land-weary ears, and a living gale poured out of the iron-hard curve of the fore-course. The lash of the wind, the beauty of the night, and the sullen crash of the bow as it shouldered its way through the sea, cleansed his mind of the miasma of the land, and of the uncomfortable feeling of guilt he had had over his part in the unceremonial disposal of the dead coolie. He leaned over the rail just forward of the cathead, and reveled in the heave and sudden swirling drop as the bow flung itself aloft or plunged downward with the gathering swell.

A royal flapped high above his head. Instantly alert, and mindful of his duty he called a warning to the man at the wheel.

An hour later he was standing at the binnacle. The ship, like a gigantic gull, was rushing through the dark water, her top hamper humming, her deck on a slant, when the soft padding of stockinged feet brought him around sharply.

It was Captain Newcomb, puffing at a big porcelain pipe cupped in his vast hand.

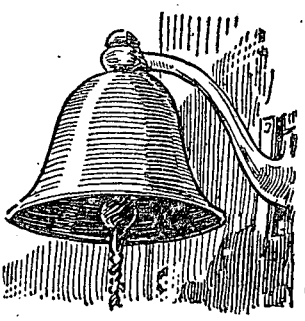
"Fine night, Mister," he said, as Dick faced him. "Walkin' her right along, I see," he added, taking the pipe from his mouth. "That's right. I like a mate who'll crack on all she'll carry. What's she doin'?"

"About eight or nine," Dick answered. "Wind's steady as a church. I haven't had to touch a brace since I came on deck."

The captain replaced his pipe and stood, swaying to the heel of the *Sara Burns*, saying nothing. Dick, watching him, saw that his pipe had gone out. At length, still silent, the skipper turned and padded to the head of the port ladder. There he stopped and looked back, his great hulk outlined against the leeward thresh of white foam.

"Call me if the wind freshens, Mister," he said. And then, as though by an afterthought as he turned to the ladder, "Change your berth, Mister. You'll bunk in the port companion, not the starboa'd, Mrs. Newcomb says. She's had your dunnage moved for you. She wants to use the starboa'd berth herself."

He was gone without another word, leaving Dick curiously stirred. It was an absurdly little thing, this compulsory change of berths, and one that did not matter to him in the least, but somehow he felt that something more than the captain had told him lay beneath the order.



One bell, signal for the change of watches, sounded, and he went below to rouse the watch.

Morning gave him his first real opportunity to examine the crew fate had unloaded upon him. The captain's estimate had been mild. They were worse than a rotten bunch. The boatswain was a Jamaican negro, with bulky shoulders, an ugly, underhung jaw and beetling cheek bones. The rest of the hands were the scouring of the Caribbean—half-breeds from Cuba, negroes from the Bahamas, two Conchs from Key West, and a white man, named White, with an evil eye, a face like a fox, and a Sydney wharf rat's accent. They were a surly lot, and he was glad to leave them and turn to Chips.

The acting second mate greeted him with a friendly grin.

"Not so bad, eh?" he asked, waving a dirty hand to windward. "If this keeps up we can pass a tow t' any N'York liner we see goin' north. Some ship, I'll say."

"Some ship," agreed Dick.

"Old Man sees to that," said Chips. "He's not so bad," he added, in a confidential aside. "But look out for his missus."

"Yeah?"

"I'm tellin' ye." Chips dodged a sheet of spray spattered over the quarter rail by the wind, and moved closer to Dick. "She bosses hell out o' him. It's a good thing for you 'at you're big. She don't like me because I'm little. Anyhow, that's the way I've got it figured out. She didn't like Johnson, and he was a little man."

"Johnson?"

"The first mate we used to have—the feller whose place you took."

"What happened to him?"

"Fever, they say." Chips jerked his elbow toward the cabin skylight. "It ain't for me to say. He was aboard and seemed all right to me yesterday mornin' when I went ashore. When I come back they said he'd been took to a hospital. Then, when we're about to sail without a first mate, comes you."

Chips paused long enough to fill one cheek with fine cut. Then, leaning closer

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to Dick, he whispered, "There's doin's aboard this ship I ain't onto yet, but I'm goin' to be. You watch me. If you try any monkey-business I'll raise hell—that's all."

"What the devil do you mean?" Dick demanded.

"Oh, nothing personal, Mr. Whitney, if that's your name, sir. You look all right to me. But the Old Man and his missus has got some sort of secret aboard this ship, and I'm goin' to find out what it is."

"Better get the men busy," said Dick, to put an end to the acting second mate's confidences.

"Aye, aye, sir," said Chips, saluting.

He turned, and was at the head of the poop ladder when Dick stopped him.

"How many Chinks are there aboard this wagon?" the first mate asked.

Chips wheeled sharply, and looked back. "None, so far as I know," he answered.

"No mess boy or steward?"

"Nope," said Chips positively. "I ain't never seen no Chink on this ship except when she was loadin' sugar back there in San Jacinto."

The two men looked silently at each other for a long moment. Then Chips announced that he guessed he'd be moseying forward.

IN THE days that followed, Dick rather avoided the acting second mate and his confidences. He did not dislike Chips. In fact, the chunky, good-natured carpenter, with the wide mouth and smiling eyes, was the only person aboard the *Sara Burns* that he did not more or less dislike. The crew, of course, was unspeakable, even if his position as first mate had not made hob-nobbing with them inadvisable.

As for the bulky, noisy captain, with the shifty blue eyes and the insignificant red nose, Dick despised him for having no will of his own.

"Cap'n Jellyfish," Chips had whispered one day when Mrs. Newcomb was giving the ship's master his orders on deck where all the men could hear.

For the woman herself, Dick's feelings were somewhat mixed. Physically, he admired her perfect poise, her swinging grace and her perfectly molded features. Sometimes he almost liked her. More often she reminded him of a slinking leopard in a zoo, creeping, soft-footed, and watching all the time a fellow captive in the corner of the cage. Rarely did she let the captain get out of her sight.

The *Sara Burns* passed a hundred miles to the east of Cape Charles, shifted her course until she headed north-northeast, and went leaping ahead in the grip of a half-gale that swept sheets of spray and scud over her starboard quarter.

Snugged down aloft to double-reefed topsails, a single-reefed main and foresail, the ship buried her nose in the rising sea and sent clouds of white water skimming to leeward.

Followed by Mrs. Newcomb, the captain came on deck about four bells that afternoon, ordered the outer jib stowed and another reef in the mainsail, glanced at the bulging weather dog with a wise eye, and went below again. Half an hour later he reappeared, this time without his gracefully swaying, closely following wife.

"How d'ye think he managed to slip away?" Chips whispered, with a jerk toward the captain, who was pacing to and fro in the lee of a strip of canvas triced up on the poop. "First time she's let him out o' her reach since we left port."

Dick glanced at the captain, who was now storming about the deck, cursing the weather. The ship was dragging her port rail through the water with a sizzling, hissing sound, broken with sharp smacks as a wave now and then caught the craft a slap on the beam or quarter. Half a dozen times the skipper went to the port rail and stared through the thickening scud in the direction of the shore, stared and swore. In the midst of one of his explosions his wife appeared, and the two went below.

Dick had his supper alone that evening. After it was finished he went back on deck to find that the night had closed in like a blanket, with the seas huge black knobs of hissing water rising out of the gloom to starboard to race menacingly shoreward past the laboring ship.

The captain was near the binnacle, sucking hard at his pipe. Mrs. Newcomb, in storm coat and peaked cap stood facing the wind, but not far from her husband.

"Beastly night," said Dick, joining them.

"Um!" grunted the captain.

"I think Mr. Whitney should sleep while he can, Captain Newcomb," Mrs. Newcomb put in, quickly.

"Better get below, Mister," the captain corroborated. "You'll need your sleep."

Dismissed, Dick went to his cabin and was asleep in a jiffy. Two hours later, or thereabout, he awoke with the feeling that someone was at his door. Raising himself on one elbow he listened intently. Save for the creaking and groaning of the

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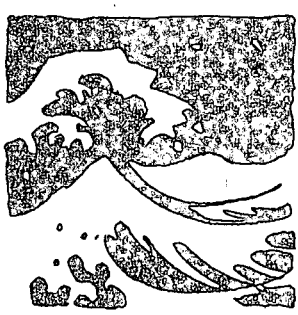
straining timbers, the crash of water alongside, and the shuddering whine of a bulkhead, he heard nothing.

He dropped back on his pillow and lay still, listening. Plainly the gale outside was increasing. It must have been the storm that had disturbed him, but he could not get rid of the feeling that someone had stood just outside his cabin—waiting.



Finally he got out of his bunk and tiptoed across the room to fling open the door. In the faint gleam from the water that slopped and slapped between the bulwarks he could see that the passage was empty.

Holding his door ajar he looked forward. From the water on the deck he decided that the *Sara Burns* had shipped a comber.

He turned and looked aft. All was dark and, save for the storm outside, deadly silent. Moved by some unaccountable impulse, he started aft through the gloom. At the door to the cuddy he paused.

For fully a minute he stood listening. Then, cautiously and noiselessly, he turned the knob and pushed the cuddy door open. He could not have told himself what he had expected to find, but he was not surprised to see between him and the stern window, a bulk, shadowy and vague, take the form of a Chinese coolie—and vanish in the gloom.

In spite of himself, the gooseflesh rose on Dick's spine, and he knew that every little hair at the base of his brain was standing on end. Backing out of the cuddy without caring how much noise he made, he shut the door with a bang.

Outside he grinned sheepishly in the dark. He was a fine first mate! No wonder Mrs. Newcomb had wanted to keep the death of the coolie a secret from the crew. She knew sailor men. If he, a white man who ought to know better, went about seeing things in the dark, what could one expect of a lot of superstitious mongrels?

But the thing he had seen certainly looked like the coolie he had helped to slip through the stern window.

He shivered again, and half-ran down the alley, past his own door and onto the deck.

He had reached the foot of the port ladder, half-deafened by the roar of the wind in the rigging, when the ship staggered and a wall of green water, capped with a crest of angry foam, rose above the starboard rail and fell with a crash as of breaking glass upon the deck.

He leaped for the ladder, but not in time to escape the sweep of the flood that caught him in its grip and carried him, struggling and clawing for a hand-hold, across the deck and banged him against the bulwark.

Dimly he felt the bulwark give, realized that it was caving away under the weight of the water, felt a rope that had washed from its rack coil about his shoulders, and clutched it frantically. Again the *Sara Burns* staggered under the crashing impact of another comber. Dick felt the bulwark go, felt the rope slipping through his fingers, and abandoned hope, when a hand gripped his and he was dragged, choking, out of the smother.

The alleyway was darker than the deck, and knee-deep in water, but a haven after the turmoil outside. For a moment he gasped for breath, trying to collect his scattered thoughts. Then he turned to speak to the man who had saved him.

He was alone. His rescuer, whoever it had been, had gone.

Outside he heard the captain bellowing orders to get some of the canvas off the laboring ship. The wind was quicker than the crew. The reefed maintopsail went with a crash, clean out of the bolt ropes. By the time Dick got back on deck the streamers were flying to leeward.

"That'll ease her," roared the skipper, when he saw the mate. "Get that furled, and get a reef in the jib. Hurry, Mister!"

It took a long time to do the work, for every member of the crew was blind with terror, but at last the ship was snug.

All that night the *Sara Burns* flew before the gale, which hauled steadily around to the east. Dick, after the ship was snug—he had worked all through his own watch—went to bed, leaving Chips on watch. He was dead tired, and dropped off to sleep immediately, to dream that he was being hauled out of a fiery pit by a hand that felt clammy and cold where it gripped his wrist. He couldn't see the hand at first, and when he did see it, he saw that it was dismembered. There was no body attached—not even an arm!

He awoke with a snort, which he had dreamed was a choked scream for help.

The dream brought back to his mind his rescuer—the mysterious hand that had pulled him out of danger just as he was

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being swept into the sea. He had not seen the owner of the hand. Blinded by the salt foam, he had seen nothing. And when he could see again, whoever had pulled him out of the sea was gone. He had nothing but the feel of the hand to remember.

Whose hand was it? Certainly not the captain's huge palm. He was sure now that the hand that had gripped him was small, rather than large. Could it be that he owed his life to a woman?

At breakfast he took occasion to look closely at Mrs. Newcomb's hands. They were long and narrow, but not the kind of hand that he had felt grip him. Besides, Mrs. Newcomb assured him, rather crossly, he thought, that she had not gone back on deck after she went to her cabin about three bells.

He tried to pump Chips, who met him on deck after breakfast, broadly smiling.

"Chips," he said, "did you pull me out of the water last night when one of the combers struck the ship?"

"Not me," Chips declared. "I was too busy pullin' myself out o' harm's way. Was you in it?"

"I should say I was," said Dick. "Somebody kept me from going overboard with that bulwark."

"Don't you know who it was?"

"No, idiot. If I did I shouldn't be asking you—but I know it wasn't you," he added. "It wasn't your hand."

"What d'ye mean, ' 'twasn't my hand?' " asked the acting second mate, resentfully, and with a glance at his gnarled fist. "I know I didn't have nothin' to do with pullin' you out o' the Atlantic, if that's what you mean, but th'ain't nothin' wrong with my hand."

Dick laughed, slapped Chips on the shoulder, and started away.

"Say," said Chips, following him, and speaking in a whisper, "there's something funny about this here *Sara Burns* this trip. She's got some kind of a jinx on her, a hoodoo o' some sort. The men has noticed it. They say she's ha'nted. They say she's got a ghost aboard."

Chips was no longer smiling. He was in deadly earnest.

"What kind of a ghost?" asked Dick, more interested than he wanted Chips to know.

"A Chink ghost—a dead coolie with a knife in his chest. Barnes, that big Jamaica black man, seen him first in the sea. He popped up for a minute in the wake o' the ship before we'd much more'n got out o' the harbor. He's been follerin' us ever since. I heard about it the first night. I thought you'd seen him when you ast me is they any Chinks aboard."

"Nonsense!" said Dick. "Do you imagine that you've seen a Chinese coolie?"

"No, I ain't seen nothin' out o' the way. But there's somethin' funny about this ship. I feel it. How many bags o' sugar did we take on?"

"Twenty-seven thousand. Why?"

"Aw, nothin', only I thought it might ha' been thirteen thousand."

"That would explain everything, wouldn't it?" asked Dick, laughing.

Chips grinned, and went about his business.

All that day the gale lasted and all the next night, by which time they figured they must be drawing near the Long Island Coast.

Twelve hours later, when the wind had dropped to a summer calm, and the sea rolled in streaky, oily swells toward the dull blue patch on the northern horizon rim, Dick went below to report that the repairs on the bulwarks were sufficient to last until they got to port, and to ask instructions for the night.

"Mrs. Newcomb says we won't try to make it in the dark," said the captain, his eyes shifting from his wife to Dick. "If the wind comes up tonight, just keep her standing off and on. But it looks like we was due for a calm."

Dick was leaving the cabin when Mrs. Newcomb stopped him.

"Better get the stern boat lowered tonight, Mr. Whitney," she said, giving him the full benefit of her curiously feline eyes. "We're going to anchor just inside the Hook in the morning and we'll need it the first thing."

"And give her plenty of line for riding," added the skipper.

"You'll look after it right away, won't you, Mr. Whitney, to make sure you don't forget it?" The yellow rim around the iris of Mrs. Newcomb's eyes seemed to widen as she spoke. "I'm very anxious to get ashore as quickly as possible. My sister is ill."

"Oh," said Dick, sympathetically. "I'm

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sorry. I'll see that you have your boat, all right."

He went out on deck ashamed of the suspicions he had had. Mrs. Newcomb's anxiety about her sister would explain a lot—the impatience of the skipper with the storm which might have delayed them, even the continual deference of the captain to his wife's wishes. Perhaps they weren't a bad lot at all.

But it wouldn't explain the shadowy shape he had seen in the cuddy the first night of the storm, or the mystery of the hand that had rescued him!

He found Chips and told him about the order to lower the stern boat.

"First time I ever knowed she had any sister, sick or well," commented Chips, as he trotted aft with Dick to carry out the Newcombs' orders.

The stern boat hung between old-fashioned wooden davits that thrust themselves out over the water directly abaft the binnacle. The two mates tailed on to the falls and lowered her away.

As they left her floating at the end of her painter, White, the fox-faced Australian, sauntered up.

"All set for the skipper and his missus to go calling, eh?" he said, insolently.

Neither Dick nor Chips made any reply, and White swung on, a malevolent leer on his pointed, evil face.

The night was friendly, with swarms of stars and a wisp of a moon. The *Sara Burns* slid softly through the water, her cordage faintly creaking, a ripple slapping her side from time to time with a silvery tinkle. About six bells Dick dropped to the combing of the poop skylight for a smoke. He was crumbling the stiff tobacco in his hand to stuff into his pipe when there came to him once more the unmistakable smell of burning opium.

All the old doubts and suspicions, lulled to sleep by Mrs. Newcomb's statement about her sick sister, and the prospect of a speedy ending to the voyage, came crowding back.

Chips was right. There was something funny about the *Sara Burns*. He thrust his pipe into his pocket and scattered the tobacco over the rail.

His step on the planking must have sounded in the cabin below, for immediately the captain's voice boomed up, "Step down here a minute, Mister!"

Obedient to the order, Dick tramped down the port ladder, along the port alleyway, and knocked at the cabin door.

"Just a moment," came the answer, in Mrs. Newcomb's voice. "We have to feel our way. The lamp's gone out."

She opened the door. "Come in," she invited.

Dick took a step forward into the gloom of the cuddy, when he heard a swish, felt a terrific blow on his head, and then a blank.

The ship was rocking gently when he came to himself. His first sensation was of an overpoweringly nauseating smell—the stale effluvium of human bodies mingled with the odor of burned-out opium.

He was in pitch darkness. Guardedly, having in mind the blow he had got as he entered the cuddy, he turned his aching head, but no dim gleam from port hole on stern window rewarded his searching eyes.

Sliding his hand cautiously along the deck, he touched a clammy something. Involuntarily, he jerked back, but not before he had sensed that the thing he had touched was another hand.

Tumultuously, there rushed over him the remembrance of his narrow escape from the sea the first night of the storm, and the nightmare that followed after he had gone to his berth. In both the reality and the dream, a hand had saved him. Was this the same hand? He sensed that it was.

He sat up and felt for a match. At the same moment he heard beside him a low moan.

He struck a light, and, in its flickering flare, saw a Chinese coolie, his arms and legs wide flung, his chest bare. Then the match went out.

He scrambled stiffly to his feet, struck another match and lighted the overhead lamp which hung within easy reach. Another moan reassured him. The Chinese at his feet was not a ghost, but a living coolie.

He was in the starboard lazarette, a triangular compartment, possibly twelve feet wide at the base and about fifteen feet long. Around the sides arranged in tiers of three were fifteen bunks.

The guttering overhead lamp showed that in every bunk but two lay stretched a Chinese coolie.

The yellow cargo was directly beneath his starboard berth. That was why Mrs. Newcomb had ordered him changed to the port berth!

Chips called through the open hatch, "Are you down there, Whitney? If y' ain't, where in hell are you? An' if y' are, why in hell are you?"

"Come here," said Dick. "Here's your

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coolie ghost—a baker's dozen of him."

Chips swung down the ladder. "Chink-runnin'," he ejaculated. "So that's what she's got the Old Man into. No wonder they skipped out. They've doped 'em and robbed 'em. Made a purty good haul, too, I betcha. Some o' them coolies goes purty well heeled."

"You don't think they're dead?" Dick asked.

"The coolies? Hell, no. They've been hittin' the pipe, that's all. The missus kep' it from 'em till she got ready to make her getaway so she could count on all of 'em passin' out while she done her dirty work. The ghost the men seen must ha' been one of 'em roamin' around tryin' to find where the missus had hid their stuff. One of 'em pulled you out of the sea, too, I reckon. But what's the matter with you?" he asked suddenly, his eyes on Dick's bloody head. "Somebody bash you in the coco?"

"Something like that, but never mind me," said Dick irritably. "What are they doing up there?"

"Oh, the missus has gone and took the captain with her, like I told you just now. You see where that leaves us. Like as not we'll all be jugged for Chink-running. Twenty years in the hoosegow that means."

A slight noise at the hatch made both men look up to see the fox-like face of White jerk back from the opening. The swift thud of bare feet overhead told the two mates that the Australian was running toward the outer deck.

"Eavesdroppin', o' course. That's his line," said Chips. "He's gone to tell them they'll all have to go to the hoosegow. Now there'll be hell to pay."

"What will they try to do?"

"Oh, I do' know. Throw the Chinks overboard, mutiny and steal the ship—some little old thing like that, I guess. Only they won't get away with it."

"Let's get on deck and see that they don't."

On the heels of Dick's last words came a rush of feet on the deck above, and White's high cockney voice, whining and shrill, screaming curses as the whole crew piled down the lazarette ladder and made for the prostrate coolies.

"Stop it, y' damn fools!" yelled Chips. "These here Chinks ain't dead. Don't you know if you throw 'em overboard you'll go to the chair?"

"T' hell with that and with you, too!" shrilled White. "These Chinks goes over rail, nicely w'ighted to hold them in plice. I ain't goin' to put in no twenty years in jile for no squiffy, slant-eye Yellow Belly. Come on, you men, load up! We'll tie the w'ights to 'em when we gets 'em all on deck."

He stooped to shoulder the coolie nearest to him.

Dick yanked him backward by the collar.

With that the crew fell bodily upon the two officers. Dick found himself pressed back and back until he was braced against the ladder leading to the open hatch, fighting all the time against three of the Jamaicans and a Conch. Little Chips in his corner was trying to stand his own against the Australian and the rest of the mongrels.

Barnes, the big black boatswain, had got his fingers around Dick's throat when there was a sudden thump on the side of the planking of the *Sara Burns,* followed by the stamping of many feet on the deck.

The fighting seamen fell back, glaring at one another and at the two mates.

Voices, a staccato order, and two men, bearing flashlights, stopped at the hatch and peered down.

"Any of the ship's officers down there?" asked the leader.

"I'm coming, sir," said Dick, starting up the ladder toward the men he now recognized as immigration officials.

Chips followed, leaving the lately fighting sailors cowering in the lazarette with the doped coolies.

"Where are those Chinks?" asked the Inspector, his tightly buttoned blue uniform coat making creases in his fat waist.

"Below, sir," answered Dick.

"Go down and count 'em, Mulvaney."

The assistant official descended the ladder. They could hear him making the round of the bunks, and counting aloud.

"I make 'em only thirteen, sir," he reported, halfway up the ladder.

"*Thirteen,* eh?" The Inspector consulted a cablegram he pulled from his pocket. "Johnson says fourteen. There's one missing. Here, Joe," turning to the door, "bring in the prisoners. We're going to get to the bottom of this thing right now."

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A moment later another immigration officer entered the cuddy, and he brought with him Mrs. Newcomb and the captain, handcuffed together.

"We have thirteen Chinese accounted for, Captain. Where is the other man?"

Even in the uncertain light, Dick could see that the captain's usually red face was a sickly green. He did not feel any too comfortable himself, with the memory of the part he had played in helping to dispose of the body of the Chinese suicide. Suppose it had not been a suicide. Suppose it had been a murder—then he could be held as an accessory after the crime. He might even be charged with the murder itself.

He felt his mouth and throat get dry.

But the captain had sagged to the deck, his right hand, fastened to his wife's left, raised in grotesque supplication.

The Inspector's eyes were on him.

"Murdered him, did you?" he was saying. "Found out he wouldn't hit the pipe so you had to kill him, eh?" His eyes were boring into the flabby soul of the fat man at his feet. "Killed him because you couldn't put him to sleep so you could rob him? Then you got cold feet and jumped ship. *You were afraid of the man you had murdered!*"

"She did it," blubbered the spineless lump. "I didn't have——"

"Shut up, you fool!" commanded Mrs. Newcomb.

"That's enough from you, ma'am," said the Inspector quietly. "I guess there'll be a murder charge against you as well as the smuggling. Take 'em back to the launch, Joe."

Dick and Chips waited, Dick with his heart still in his mouth, to hear their fate. The Inspector looked at them and smiled.

"Want to know all about it, don't you?" he said. "These two Newcombs have been rum-running ever since we've had national prohibition. We knew they were doing it, but never could catch 'em with the goods. They played a lone hand in it, so far as we've been able to find out, keeping what they were doing even from their crew. We have suspected that one or two of their first mates got wise to them. They have had quite a fatality among their ship's officers. Johnson was one of our men. He's a good sailor, and went over with them on this last trip as a first mate. He was watching for rum, of course, and it wasn't until they were about to sail that he discovered that it was to be yellow cargo instead of wet. They got onto him about the same time. He was

taken suddenly ill, and was packed off to a hospital—poisoned, he believes. He recovered sufficiently three days later to cable me. That's all there is to it."

"Where did you find the captain and his missus?" asked Dick, as soon as he was sure his tongue wouldn't rattle in his mouth if he tried to speak.

"Out in the bay. We saw them leave the *Sara Burns,* and caught them before they got ashore. They were planning to make a clean getaway. With all the money they'd got for smuggling the Chinks, and what the Chinks had on them when they doped 'em, I guess they figured they could afford to lose the ship."

"What's going to happen to us?" Dick queried. He felt at ease at last, and found that he liked the big, capable man in the tight uniform.

"You're going to get your men out and get the *Sara Burns* into port," said the Inspector, with a grin. "We've got nothing on you."

When the ship was clear of all save one of the immigration officials, Chips called down to the men below, "Get out on deck, ye swine, and maybe there'll be no more trouble for ye this voyage!"

Then he followed Dick Whitney aft, where the early morning light showed the stern boat of the *Sara Burns* bobbing at the end of its painter behind the immigration inspector's launch.

"I knowed they was a hoodoo on board this ship," he said. "It was them thirteen Chinks. The ghost didn't count."

DAYLIGHT SAVING OF OTHER DAYS

WHEN people complain of the confusion resulting from local application of the "daylight saving" principle, and the change of time from one section of the country to another, they should be reminded of the old days when every community ran on "sun time" and there were seventy different time standards for the railroads. "The good old days" had their drawbacks.

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THE DESERT'S PRICE

The Story of a Cattle Country Feud

By WILLIAM MACLEOD RAINE

Author of "Sand in His Craw," "Man Size," etc.

PART II

CHAPTER XIII

RED TRAGEDY

GOING to Mesa, son," said Matthew Stark to his son, Phil. "Hook up the team for me, won't you?"

The boy nodded, but before he went to the stable dodged for a moment into the kitchen. Julia was making pies.

"He's going to Mesa," Phil said quickly.

Julia at once unfastened her apron. "Keep him here till I'm dressed," she told him, and moved in her swift, light way to the bedroom she used.

While Phil, with the assistance of a wrangler, was hitching to a buckboard the half-broken colts his father drove, a rider jogged up and stopped to pass a word. The man worked for an outfit down the river.

"'Lo, Red!" Phil greeted him. "How they comin'?"

"No complaint, as ol' man Peters said when his third wife died. Everything fine an' dandy with you?"

Red eased his weight in the saddle to relax stiffened muscles and rolled a cigarette. Time was not of the essence of his contract and he was ready to gossip as the fractious colts were being patiently reduced to harness.

"Miz Rollins jes' got back from Los Angeles, an' she happened on a piece of news out there right interestin'," the cowboy volunteered. "She was takin' care of her daughter whilst an' interestin' event was occurring. They was a nurse there to meet the li'l stranger the stork was bringin', an' it seems she was hired a while ago to look after Nora Gifford, one o' them sheep ranch women. The Gifford girl she had a hard time of it an' died—her an' the baby, too. Folks have kinda figured they was something wrong when the oldest sister come back alone. There's been right consid'rable talk."

Phil flushed angrily. "Why don't folks mind their own damn business?" he blurted out.

"You a friend of the Giffords, Phil?" asked Red.

"Maybe I am; maybe I ain't. That's not the point. What I claim is that we're in big business when we pick on some lone girls an' make their life hell for them." The generous indignation of youth flamed in him.

"Tha's right, too," agreed Red.

"I knew Nora Gifford—some. She was a mighty sweet girl. The lobo wolf that ruined her life had ought to be hunted down an' shot in his tracks."

"Y'betcha!" agreed Red with the easy variability of the cowpuncher. "Drygulchin' wouldn't be none too good for him."

"Well, if you ask me, I'd kinda like to

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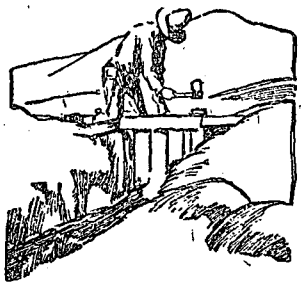
know the circumstances before I pass judgment so prompt," the old wrangler said by way of differing. "An' I don't reckon any of us is ever liable to find out. That Miss Ann Gifford is a mighty close-mouthed lady. Say, I'd smoke a cigareet if someone would feed me the makin's."

From his hip pocket Red dragged a sack of "smoking." The wrangler rested from his labors and lit up.

"I seen Wils McCann as I come up the road," Red said, in a carefully casual voice.



He was fixin' the head gates of that ditch runnin' along the ridge to his father's place."

"Right now?" asked Phil instantly.

"Well, it's a good four-five miles from here. Say an hour ago."

Matthew Stark came out from the house and swung across the yard toward the stable with his strong bowlegged stride. As usual he carried a rifle. He had not covered twenty yards before Julia appeared.

"Oh, dad!" she called.

Stark stopped, waiting for her. But before she could frame her request he refused it.

"No, you can't go to town with me. I don't care how many dofunnys you got to buy. No use you pesterin' me either."

"But, dad——"

"You heard me, Jule. You ain't going. That's settled."

"We're out of salt, dad, and canned tomatoes, and lots of things."

"You make a list. I'll get 'em."

"But I've got to match that goods for my new dress. Why can't I go?"

"Because I say so. Now, honey, don't you argue with me about it. It won't be a mite of use."

THE DESERT'S PRICE

WILLIAM MACLEOD RAINE

A word about the story and what has happened before

Anything from the magnetic pen of Mr. Raine is sure to have those elements inseparable from all great stories of the American West. So here you will find them: hard-bitten characters, passions that sear like desert winds, unforeseen ways in which men make or break themselves when hard pressed by the cross-currents of conflicting interests. Plus the lure of sheer adventure, from first to last chapter!

A long-standing enmity between the McCanns and the Starks, rival ranch-owners of the country that edges upon the Painted Desert, is much intensified when young Wilson McCann is treacherously shot at by Jasper Stark while McCann is on a peaceful errand at the Stark ranch.

In giving aid to an old nester named Jim Yerby, who had broken a leg earlier that day, McCann has met young Julia Stark, the beautiful, high-spirited daughter of old Matthew. When she learns who he is she treats him with contempt. And she later discredits his story about Jas trying to shoot him.

The feud between the McCanns and Starks breaks out into open warfare, following an attack on two punchers employed by old Peter McCann, Wils's father. Perfunctorily, Peter appeals to the sheriff, who is a Stark sympathizer. Then, ready to take the law into his own capable hands if necessary, Peter tacks up a notice promising a reward for the names of the men who shot his ranch hands. Young Jas Stark, with boastful threats, tears down the notice, but Wils McCann, who had ridden up, unseen by Jas, gives him a severe beating. Jas makes no attempt to fight back. When Matthew hears of his son's cowardice he orders him off the range and says he will change his will so that Jas shall inherit nothing. Jas, determined to prevent this, makes a secret deal with Gitner, a gunman employed by Jas's father.

In the meantime, old Matthew has stuck up a notice of his own, promising to shoot Wils McCann on sight.

This is the situation that confronts Julia Stark as she again meets Wils by chance at Yerby's cabin. She also meets there a young woman by the name of Ann Gifford, a soured recluse who runs a sheep ranch in the vicinity.

Julia pleads with Wils to avoid her father, for she wants no further bloodshed. Deep down in her heart she is not only anxious for the safety of her father, but also for Wils. Naturally, however, Wils refuses to comply with any request that would stamp him as a coward.

Julia, visiting Jas in the little town of Mesa, where he is now living, tells him that her father is determined to cut him off in the new will, despite all her pleading. He tells her he won't stand for it. Then he adds that he's going to "fix" Wils McCann at the first opportunity, without waiting for his father to make good the same threat.

"The McCanns started this," was Jas's final word, "an' it'll have to go through now."

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She came up close and took him by the coat lapels. She had always been the center of his dearest love. In his heart he thought her the most beautiful and wonderful creature under heaven.

"I want to go—awf'ly," she whispered, her deep, dark eyes appealingly earnest.

Because he found himself weakening he took refuge in temper. "Well, you'll not go. You'll stay right here at home. I'll show you whether I can't go off this ranch without being tagged by you or someone else. I claim to be a full grown hombre an' I don't need any nurse. Not in this year of our Lord. You drop this interferin' in my affairs, Jule, an' behave yoreself. I won't have it."

He swung her round by the shoulders and started her toward the house.

As he got into the buckboard Phil gave him information. "Red says he saw Wils McCann at the ditch gates above the Three Cottonwoods. He may not be alone. Better let me go, too, dad."

Matt Stark flung a couple of crisp questions at the cowpuncher and announced his decision. "You'll stay here, Phil. This is my job, an' I'm going to attend to it right now if he's still there. Let go." This last to the wrangler at the head of the dancing colts.

The young horses dashed down the road, racing at top speed. The gravel flew as the wheels crunched through it.

Already Phil was saddling a horse he found in the stable. He rode to the house, swung off, and ran inside.

Julia met him coming out of his room carrying a rifle.

"Where you going?" she asked breathlessly.

"Wils McCann is down above the Three Cottonwoods. Pretends to be fixin' up the ditch gates. When he came by a while ago, Red saw him. Likely he's waitin' to get dad if he comes along. I've got to get there before dad does, so I'm takin' the hill trail."

Her heart contracted with a swift spasm of fear. "Let me go, too, Phil."

"No. What can you do? Besides, I can't wait."

He brushed past her, pulled himself to the saddle, and was off instantly at a gallop.

For a moment Julia stood, sick with dread. Then, with a strong resurgence of courage, she followed Phil out of the house and ran to the stable.

"Get my saddle all ready," she cried to the wrangler as she snatched up a rope and flew to the corral.

Here she lost precious seconds. At the first cast the rope slid down the back of the pony. She had to rewind, did the job bunglingly on account of her hurry, and the loop missed again. The ponies raced around the corral, but at the third throw the riata fell true over the head of the bronco and tightened. The horse gave up at once. Julia led her mount to the gate where the wrangler was waiting with saddle, bridle and blanket.

The man slapped on the blanket, adjusted the saddle, and cinched it expertly. Julia kept urging him to hurry.

"What's all this racin' an' hurry about?" he wanted to know.

"That Wils McCann is down the road waiting for dad. We just heard it."

"Where?"

"At the ditch above Three Cottonwoods."

She called this back over her shoulder as the pony found its stride. When she passed the clicking windmill it was at a gallop.

The sun was high in the blue bowl above and the atmosphere was a-quiver with light and heat. The ribs of the porphyry sierras stood out stark and gaunt. Spiral dust whorls danced down the valley like great tops set spinning by Olympians.

Julia swung into the cutoff that led to the hills. She rode fast, not sparing the horse, for an urgent spur was driving her. If she could arrive in time she might avert a tragedy. Just how she did not know, but she would find a way. It was not possible that they would kill each other if she flung herself between them. Surely they would not do that.

But the hope that had swept her into swift action was ebbing. She was oppressed by the deep conviction that calamity impended. Within there rang a bell of dreadful doom. She knew her father, how implacable and overbearing he was. She began to know Wilson McCann's quality of mind. If they met, nothing could prevent an explosion. One or both would fall.

The buckskin she had roped was a good traveler, but she seemed to crawl over the ground. The hills were steep and rough, the declivities sharp. Catclaw bordered the path and

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prickly pear clutched at her skirt. She deflected, trying to save a few hundred yards, and presently found herself in a thicket of cactus and mesquite that grew more dense as she proceeded.

Out of this she worked, desperately aware that she had wasted invaluable minutes. An open draw offered promise of faster progress. This led to a pocket, the sides of which were so precipitous that she had to dismount to find a way up.

It was just as she reached the summit that the sound of a shot appalled her. She leaned against the saddle for a moment, shaken to the soul, before she could remount.

Julia spurred the buckskin in the direction from which the report had come. She rode recklessly, careless of danger of a fall from the plunging horse. All her being was obsessed by terror. Fears for those she loved rose and choked her.

The irrigation canal appeared below and presently the ditch used by the McCanns and their neighbors to carry water to their ranches. Automatically her brain registered the fact that while the canal was half full of water, the ditch was empty.

The pony swung round a clump of bushes and shied so violently that Julia was almost unseated. A man was stooping over something that lay huddled on the ground. The girl dragged the animal to a halt and flung herself from the saddle. As she ran back she noticed that the man held a rifle in his hand. He straightened and turned toward her.

The man was Wilson McCann.

In his rigid face her fear-filled eyes read confirmation of what she had dreaded. She looked down—and from her throat there leaped an anguished cry. The stricken figure at their feet was that of her father. In the center of his forehead was a small round hole. He was dead beyond any question of doubt.

CHAPTER XIV

A GOOD SAMARITAN

JULIA wailed, "Oh, daddy—daddy!" as she went down to her knees beside the lax body.

Upon it she lavished the exuberance of despairing grief. The death of him who had always been the outstanding figure in her world, the embodiment of stark and ruthless strength, was so unthinkable that she tried to push away the fact, to blot it out of being by the vehemence of denial. It could not be true. It could not. Yet she knew beneath the violence of protest that it was horribly true. In an instant of time he had been stricken out of life.

Wilson McCann waited for the first emotional outburst to spend itself. This was no place for him. He knew that. The drumming hoofs of his horse should be putting miles between him and the scene of this tragedy. But first he had something to tell her, as soon as she was in a condition to listen. Besides, he could not leave her alone with her dead while she was still hysterical.

A twig snapped. Instantly McCann stiffened to alert and crouched wariness. The weapon in his hand shifted ever so little, but that scarcely perceptible movement meant that he was ready. His eyes searched the chaparral foot by foot.

The sun glistened on a rifle barrel. At once McCann moved swiftly so as to place the girl's horse between him and that shining tube of steel.

Out of the brush a face peered, searching the landscape. The shifting eyes found in the same instant of time both McCann and the grief-stricken girl, and a second later the supine figure over which her grief was spending itself. The surprise of the combination of the three paralyzed momentarily thought processes.

Julia had looked up when McCann ran for the shelter of the horse's body. She glanced round quickly, caught sight of the gleaming gun barrel, and rose hurriedly.

"Look out, Phil. He's killed dad," she cried, in a panic of terror.

Without a thought for her own safety she ran straight across the open toward the mesquite thicket to protect her brother.

A shot rang out. McCann crumpled up behind the horse. Julia heard herself cry out, and even in that moment of fear felt a sense of puzzled wonder. For she had been looking at Phil and she was sure he had not fired.

Phil dragged her down behind him. "He's layin' a trap for me," he told her, almost in a whisper.

But Julia, looking over his shoulder, knew this could not be. For the man's head lay in the sand, his rifle flung six feet away by the fall.

Again there came the crack of a rifle.

"He's dead, but you didn't shoot," she murmured, horrified.

"Can't be dead," the boy answered. "How can he be?"

"Someone shot—and neither you nor he did. I'm going to see."

"No," he protested.

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But she was gone before he could stop her. Phil scrambled to his feet and followed.

One glance at McCann was enough to show that this was no ruse. He lay still, either dead or unconscious. The boy stooped and found where a bullet had gone through the shirt.

"He was shot from behind, looks like," he said.

"But—who?" Julia asked, white to the lips.

"Jas maybe." Phil said it reluctantly.

"Why Jas?"

"Tha's what made me late. I saw someone dodging in the chaparral. Looked like Jas, but maybe it wasn't. Anyhow, I stopped to find out an' he slipped away. I wish to God I hadn't. I might a-been on time."

They had walked over to the place where their father lay and were kneeling beside him. With her handkerchief Julia wiped from the forehead of the cattleman the little stain of blood showing where the bullet had entered his head. Her slim body was shaken with sobs. The face of the boy was working with emotion. For the first time in their lives they had been brought very close to death in swift and tragic form. The blow was staggering. The virile dominant personality of their father would never again rule their activities. He had gone out of life as the flame of a blown candle vanishes.

"One of us'll have to go get the wagon," Phil said presently in an unsteady voice. "Dad musta left it somewheres near."

"Yes. You go, Phil."

She was clinging to him, quivering with grief.

"Now don't you, Jule. Don't you," he begged, and denied his own counsel by breaking down unexpectedly.

They cried in each other's arms. After a little Phil spoke gruffly, ashamed of his own distress. "I'll be moving. Sure you don't mind stayin' alone, sis?"

"No. But don't be longer than you can help."

"If you'd rather not stay——"

"No. I want to stay."

"I'll leave dad's rifle with you. Not that you'll need it." He tested the mechanism to make sure it was in order. "He hadn't fired a shot. McCann got him from the chaparral, don't you reckon?" Then, with a high sobbing note in his voice, "By God, this'll be a bad day for the McCanns."

"Yes." In that monosyllable she concentrated all the passionate desire for vengeance in her young heart.

"My horse is in the brush," Phil said in anti-climax. "I'll go to the road an' have a look-see for the buckboard."

He disappeared among the mesquite bushes, and after a minute Julia heard the sound of a moving horse threshing about in the brush.

The sun was shining on a land peaceful as old age. She could hear the faint twitter of birds. A cotton-tail hopped from behind a clump of cactus and looked at her. On a flat rock ten feet away a swift lay basking. Nothing had changed, yet everything had changed. Something had gone out of her life that would never come back. An hour ago she had been a girl, gay and carefree, singing at her work. That happy irresponsibility was gone forever. She was no longer a girl, but a sad-eyed woman. With youth's lack of perspective, she was sure that she would never laugh or sing again.

Julia covered her father's face with his own bandanna handkerchief. She did it to keep the sun out of his eyes, even though no light could ever be bright enough now to trouble them.

A slight stir made her turn. Wilson McCann had rolled over and was looking at her. For a moment the two gazed at each other, neither speaking.

"I didn't kill him," he said at last, feebly.

"You murdered him from ambush," she charged.

"No. I heard a shot. I came an' found him lying there." The weakness was wholly physical. The steely eyes did not flinch in the least.

"I hope you'll die as he did, without a chance for your life," she cried in a low, bitter voice.

"I reckon I'll do that—soon. But first—I'd like to set this straight. I didn't kill yore father."

"What's the use of saying that?" she wailed, struck anew as if by a knife blade at thought of her loss.

"You don't believe it. Look at my Winchester."

"Couldn't you have reloaded?"

"I could, but I didn't. Oh, well! What's

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the use? I'm a McCann, so I must a-done it."

"Weren't you waiting here to—to murder him?" she cried in a passion of horror.

There was a look in his eyes she did not understand. It was as though he knew something he did not mean to tell her, as though he were actually pitying her.

"I told you—if I had to do it—that it would be in the open. He was shot from the chaparral."

She did not believe that he was guiltless. She could not think that. And yet he——

"What do you mean?" she asked.

His head sank into the sand and his eyes closed.

Reluctantly she moved toward him, drawn by his great need. He was the enemy of her house, the one who had brought disaster irretrievable to it. But he was, she believed, a dying man. The eternal mother was in that hour stronger in her than the daughter of her father.

She knelt beside him, looking for the wounds. A stain of wet blood in the back of the shirt showed that he had been shot from behind. The sight of it gave her a little shock, for she recalled what Phil had said about seeing someone who looked like Jasper. And he had told her, Jasper had, that he intended to get Wils McCann. Had he done it? She hoped not. Even though this man had killed her father, she shrank from the thought that her brother had fired the bullet that had so quickly avenged Matt Stark. Murder from the chaparral was a dreadful thing, a crime wholly alien to the frank and passionate temperament of the girl.

Water was needed, and Julia had not brought a canteen. She took the dusty hat of the man and ran to the canal, where she filled it with water. This she carried back carefully, picking a way through the brush so as to avoid the prickly pear and the cholla.

In one of his pockets she found a knife and used it to cut away the soaked shirt clinging to the wounds. With the handkerchief taken from her neck she bathed the muscular back. Apparently he had been shot through the lung, well up near the shoulder, and in the right side.

Julia worked with her father's rifle at her side. The man who had shot McCann might appear out of the chaparral to find out how well he had done his work.

The eyes of the wounded man flickered open and fastened on her. She was now sponging his face and temples with a clean strip torn from the handkerchief. Silently he watched her. The touch of her cool fingers was comforting. As he lay there weakly it seemed to him that some healing property passed from her to him through them. It came as a conviction that he was not going to die, that he would get well.

She knew that he was conscious, that his eyes were absorbing her. The knowledge of it was vexing. Whatever service must be done for him she would rather were done without his being aware of it.

"My brother has gone for a wagon," she said coldly.

He did not ask what she meant to do with him. It was possible she might think she had answered sufficiently the call upon her humanity and leave him here to perish. It was possible that after she had gone the man who had shot him would creep up through the bushes and make an end of him. But he did not believe that either of these would occur. She would look after him somehow, even though she thought he had killed her father.

He must set her straight on that. He could not let her go on thinking it. "I didn't kill yore father," he said a second time.

"Even if you didn't, what's the difference? Your friends did. You were here waiting for him."

"No," he denied. "I was alone—none of my folks with me."

"I don't believe it. If you didn't fire the shot you know who did." She said it in all bitterness of green young grief.

And instantly she knew, as her eyes challenged his, that she had hit upon the truth. He had not himself shot her father, but he could give her the name of the man who had done it. Her heart hardened. She rose, turned her back upon him, and walked away. He had lied to her. He was as guilty as though his own finger had pulled the trigger.

The minutes dragged. Julia could not get the wounded man out of her mind, even when she was stooping over the body of her father and brushing flies from the folded hands. Did he need her? She had heard that wounded men became ter-

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ribly thirsty. He might be suffering now. Or perhaps he had died since she had left him. She found herself turning, so that she could get a sight of him out of the corner of her eye.

He lay still. Suddenly she could stand it no longer. Quickly she walked back to him. His quiet eyes met hers.

"Are you thirsty?" she asked.

"Yes."

Again she took his hat for water. She held it to his lips while he drank, supporting his head with one arm beneath it.

His thanks drew from her no comment. Apparently she did not hear him. But presently she bathed again the hot face and afterward stood between him and the burning sun.

There came at last the sound of wagon wheels. She called, to direct the driver of the buckboard. The rig jolted into sight. Her brother Phil had brought with him Sam Sharp, the stableman. The old wrangler had been hurrying to the scene armed for battle and the boy had met him.

They put the body of Matthew Stark into the wagon.

Hard-eyed, Phil looked at his wounded enemy. "What about him?" he asked harshly.

"We'll take him home with us," Julia said.

"No," he demurred.

"Yes, Phil. We can't leave him here. He's a dying man, you know. We'll take him to the ranch and send word to his father."

"What for?" the boy wanted to know. "We can send word he's here."

Unexpectedly McCann opened his eyes and spoke. "That would be better."

"A damn sight better, an' if you die before he gets here it'll suit me fine," Phil flung out bitterly.

"We're going to take him with us, Phil," his sister answered. "We can't leave him here. That's all there's to it. I hate him as much as you do, but it would be inhuman to go and leave him. I'll not do it."

Sharp backed his young mistress. "Tha's right, Phil. I reckon we got to take him."

They lifted him up and put him beside the dead man.

McCann's face was touched by an acridly sardonic smile. "You're all plumb good Samaritans," he murmured.

CHAPTER XV

WES TAPSCOTT, DIPLOMATIST

WHEN the buckboard drew up at the Circle Cross a small group of grim-faced men were waiting to receive its grievous load. For Phil had galloped ahead to prepare the ranch for the homecoming of him who had ruled as autocrat for many years. Among those gathered on the porch were Dominick Rafferty, the foreman, and the Texans, Stone and Gitner. They were a lean, brown, hard-bitten lot. The desert had claimed its toll of them.

Rafferty scowled at the wounded McCann. "What about this buzzard?" he asked callously. "What's the idea in bringin' him here? Couldn't you bump him off where he was at?"

Julia was white to the lips. The ordeal of bringing back her father had proved almost more than she could endure. She had ridden close to the wagon and seen it and the road through a mist of tears all the way. Matthew Stark had been so big a figure in her young life that the thought of existence without his protective love was terrifying and appalling. It shook her courage and drowned her heart in woe.

"Don't talk like that, Dominick," she begged tremulously.

"How you want him to talk?" Gitner asked with an ugly sneer. "Do you figure we'll let this hombre get away with what he's done?"

Julia flashed one look of anger at the Texan. "You'll do as you're told, Carl Gitner, or you'll get your time."

"You're boss now, aren't you?" the big Texan snarled.

"Don't push on yore reins, Carl," advised Rafferty.

Boy and man the foreman of the Circle Cross had been with Stark for more than thirty years. He was devoted to him and his family. Even though he might not approve of what they had done, he had no intention of siding with anybody against them.

Julia took control of the arrangements. "Take father to his own room," she gave orders. "And carry this man to Jasper's

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room. Will you send someone for Doctor Sanders, Dominick?"

In the country of wide spaces news travels on the wings of the wind. Before Doctor Sanders left town on his way to the Circle Cross it was known all over Mesa that Wils McCann had got Matt Stark, and that he was himself desperately wounded and a prisoner in the hands of the enemy. Within two hours it had reached the Flying V Y and Peter McCann was organizing a rescue party.

"Better go kinda easy to start with," Wes Tapscott suggested. "I figure we're aimin' to spy out the land this trip an' not exactly call for a showdown. This business asks for some deep-plomacy, as the papers say."

"We'll three of us go—you an' Lyn an' me," McCann decided. "An' Dusty will follow with a wagon to bring the boy home."

"If we get him," amended the foreman.

"If they don't give him up I'll round up the boys an' tear the ranch-house to pieces," Peter answered, his mouth set grimly and his eyes hard as jade.

"Sure you will, an' we'll find the boy's body when we finally get in. There's more'n one way to skin a cat, Peter McCann."

"I'm aimin' to get my boy," the cattleman said stubbornly.

"Dead or alive?" asked his friend. "Seems to me, Pete, I'd use a little horse sense. We ain't lookin' for trouble now—not whilst Wils is a prisoner, as you might say, at the Circle Cross. They got the dead wood on you. Our play is to be reasonable till we get the boy safe home. Tha's how it looks to me."

"What's yore notion then of what we should do?" McCann inquired surlily. He did not want to talk soft to any Stark. It went against the grain that he could not drive ram-stam to his end.

They were on their way by this time, moving at a low, daisy-clipping road gait. To save time they were cutting across country, a rolling land creased by arroyos and washes dry as a lime kiln.

"Well, if I set any store by that boy—an' I reckon you do—I'd not run on the rope today, by gum. I'd jest naturally act like I was mighty sorry the way things had turned out an'——"

"You want me to tell the Starks that Wils was to blame—after the old man had posted him all over the county? That it?"

"Not exactly, Pete. But play yore cards close. Lemme ride ahead an' see how things stack up. I'll bring Doc Sanders out to you an'——"

"I'm not going home without seeing Wils. You can't talk me outa that, Wes."

Privately Tapscott was of opinion that the Starks would never let McCann into their house alive. It was not reasonable to expect it, with old Matt lying there dead at the hands of Peter's son. But he did not say so bluntly.

"We'll see how it works out. Maybe they'll be willin' to let us move Wils. First off, we gotta find out what their intentions are. I aim to do that, if you'll stand back an' let me."

"I can do that my own self *muy pronto*."

"Sure enough, but I reckon their intentions might be different by the time you'd ripped loose with a few comments. Tell you our play is to smooth down their fur till we got Wils safe in our hands. A deef an' dumb blind man would get that without argument, Pete."

The owner of the Flying V Y looked across the soap weed and the arrow weed thickets to a grove of giant saguaro on a hillside. The scenery did not interest him. It is doubtful if he saw any of its details, for his mind was wholly absorbed with his problem.

"Have it yore own way, Wes," he said at last. "An' if it don't work out I'll ce'tainly be right there with fighting talk."

"Don't I know you?" the majordomo went on patiently. "But I expect we'd better look at this from the Stark point of view just a mite. The way they look at it we started this killing when we bumped off that rider McArdle."

"What's the sense in sayin' that when you know damn well we didn't?" Peter cut back irritably.

"I ain't claimin' we did. I'm tellin' you that they claim it. I'd give a plug of chewing if I knew who did dry gulch him, an' could prove it. But we'll never know, I reckon. Well, then Wils up an' gives

Jas Stark the bud till the big bully-puss yelps like the cur he is. That don't set well with the Starks who are proud as that

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Faro king Moses had to sic' the plagues on because he wouldn't give his folks a square deal. Top of that, Wils kills old Matt. The whole clan of 'em are likely out for blood."

"What do they expect? Matt Stark served notice he would shoot Wils on sight, didn't he?"

"Yep. But you're not askin' them to be fair, are you? The point that sticks out like a sore thumb to them is that old Matt is dead an' Wils killed him. They won't look back of that an' in their place you wouldn't either. Use yore brains, Pete. Their fingers are itchin' to pull a trigger when they've got a bead on some of us. They're fightin' crazy likely. An' if I'd let you alone you'd play right into their hands."

McCann recognized the justice of his foreman's views. The situation was so delicate that it must be handled with wisdom to prevent an explosion that might be fatal to Wilson. Figuratively speaking, he threw up his hands.

"All right, Wes. I reckon you're right. You run it an' let's see where we get off at."

Chapter XVI

An Arrangement is Made

PETER McCANN and his son Lyn waited at the pass above the Circle Cross while Wes Tapscott rode down into the valley alone. They drew off a little way into the brush in order not to have to answer inconvenient questions in case someone chanced to come along the road.

The foreman held his horse to a steady road gait as any other traveler brought here on business might be expected to do. He had left his rifle with the McCanns. On his present errand it could not be of use to him and might serve to anger the enemy. His six-shooter he had thrust between his trousers and his shirt in front, for he wanted it very handy in case of need. He hoped not to have to use it. Gunplay would not only mean the failure of his mission, but probably would be disastrous for him at such odds.

The afternoon sun was heliographing signals from the blades of the clicking windmill. A line of cattle, led by one bawling cow with neck outstretched, moved toward the watering troughs. Under the great live oak at one end of the house four or five saddled horses were hitched to the rack.

Wes rode leisurely across the open and swung from the saddle. He was conscious that at least two men watched him. One was at the corral, the other lounging in the doorway of the house. Tapscott did not tie to the shiny bar, even with a slip knot. He might have to leave in a hurry. So he dropped the reins to the ground. Practically speaking, this would fasten the cowpony until he gathered up the reins again.

The Flying V Y man took a plug of tobacco from his hip pocket and helped himself to a chew. He saw without any visible concern that the man at the corral was running forward and drawing a revolver from its holster.

Tapscott jingled his way houseward with the bowlegged swing of the dismounted horseman of the plains. "Hello the house!" he called.

The man in the doorway was Phil Stark. He was no longer lounging. He stood straight, face keen as a blade.

"What you doing here?" he demanded.

Then, before the words had died on his lips, he ran swiftly down the steps and joined the Flying V Y man. For there had come a puff of smoke, the spit of a bullet striking sand. The man running from the corral had fired.

Tapscott turned swiftly, hand on gun. But he did not draw. Phil Stark was between him and Carl Gitner.

"Put up that gun," the boy ordered the Texan. "Don't you see he's here as a messenger?"

"I see he's Wes Tapscott. That's enough for me," the hired bully answered heavily. "Get outa the way there, boy, or I won't be responsible."

Light footsteps sounded on the porch and the stairs. A slim figure flashed past Tapscott and joined Phil.

"Don't you dare shoot," Julia cried.

Out of the men's bunkhouse came Stone, and at his heels Rafferty.

"Don't get on the prod, Carl," the ranch foreman shouted. "No sense in pumpin' lead till you know where you're at."

Gitner blustered, but he put up the weapon, growling something about a herd bossed by a cow.

To the Flying V Y man Rafferty put a blunt question. "What d'you want here?"

"I drapped in to see if we couldn't fix things up an' to get the correct facts. I'm hopin' the story we've heard ain't true," Tapscott replied amiably.

"What have you heard?"

"Well, mostly rumors, I reckon."

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"If you think they're rumors what are you worryin' about?" Phil asked with a flash of bitter anger.

"Well, I ain't exactly worryin', but we've heard stories and o' course we're not lookin' for trouble, so we figured I'd better come to headquarters an'——"

Rafferty ripped out a sudden savage oath. "That lowdown mangy coyote Wils McCann waylaid an' killed Matt Stark this mo'ning, since you're here for facts."

Mildly Tapscott protested. "I don't reckon Wils would waylay anyone, Nick. Was anyone else present? Who says he waylaid him? I know for a fact that Wils wasn't lookin' for trouble."

Phil's voice broke shrill and high. "Wasn't he? Well, he's found it. You go back an' tell them so that sent you."

"Meaning he's been hurt?"

"Meaning he's lying in the house here shot through an' through."

"Tha's bad."

"Bad for the McCanns," retorted Rafferty. "I reckon you ain't worryin' none about Matt."

"Tha's bad, too," Tapscott replied. "I was hopin' we could patch up this range war before it got too late."

"You can't," Phil interrupted with a touch of hysteria in his boyish voice. "Not till I've got two-three McCanns."

The foreman of the Flying V Y ignored this. He had not come to make or receive a declaration of war. "What does Doc Sanders say about Wils?" he asked.

"Gives him a day—or maybe two," Gitner cut in triumphantly, with a raucous laugh.

Tapscott looked through the Texan without apparently seeing him. But the blank hardness of his gaze softened as he turned to Julia. He had an appeal to make, and he hoped that she would back it.

"How can I go back an' tell his old dad that? It'll sure break his heart. He sets the world an' all by that boy. What can we do? Does Doc think we could move Wils?"

"You'll not move him. He'll stay right here," Rafferty announced.

"Old Pete can have his body after he's dead," Gitner said brutally.

Julia addressed herself to Tapscott just as though the two men had not spoken. "No, Doctor Sanders says he can't possibly be moved."

"Then you'll let Pete see him, won't you, ma'am? You wouldn't keep an old man away from his boy, not at a time like this. That wouldn't be hardly human, I reckon."

"How about killing from the chaparral? Is that human?" Phil asked harshly.

"No, but it ain't proved he done that," Tapscott demurred. "I've knowed that boy since he was knee high to a duck, an' I can't believe it of him. But that ain't the point. His old dad is out there in the mesquite waitin' for me to bring him news of his son. What am I to tell him, ma'am?"

Julia's eyes were on a sudden little wells of brimming tears. She thought of her own father and of how he would have felt if she had been dying in the house of an enemy. She hated the McCanns, every last one of them. They had struck at her a mortal blow from which she would never recover. All her life she would cherish revenge. But even so she could not keep a father from the son whose life was ebbing. If she did that she would always despise herself.

"Tell him he can see his boy."

"If he feels like he wants to take the chance," Gitner added with an evil sneer.

For the first time Stone spoke, in the low drawl of the Southland. "If Miss Julia says Pete McCann can come here, why I reckon it'll be all right with you an' me, Carl, won't it?"

Gitner's eyes met his reluctantly. There was something compelling in the cool steady gaze of the little man, something that was a menace if not a threat in the even murmur of the voice. The big Texan said no more, but he said it sulkily.

Julia drew her brother aside and urged upon him impetuously her point of view. He listened, half-resentful, half-consenting. The trouble was that he did not know how under these difficult circumstances to live up to the responsibilities of the situation. The youth in him, the milk of his tenderness not yet dried up, appreciated and shared her feeling. But he had to remember his loyalty to the dead father within. He must not forget that for the hour at least, until Jasper should arrive on the scene, he was head of the clan of Stark. He was conscious of his inexperience, but he could not ask anyone for advice. Would it be construed as weakness for him to let Peter McCann into the

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house? Did his honor not rather demand that he shoot the man on sight?

The boy in him was for the moment dominant. "All right. Have it yore own way. I know you will anyhow," Phil said, a little sullenly. "Tell Tapscott to have him come down."

"No, that won't do, Phil. I don't trust that Carl Gitner. We'd better go and meet him, you and I. We'll ride one on each side of him."

To this Phil assented. He might be in doubt as to the right of permitting McCann to step upon the ranch, but he was quite clear that if the man came he did not want him shot down from the bunkhouse or the corner of the stable. Before he and his sister rode away with the Flying V Y man he had a few words with Dominick Rafferty, whom he knew he could trust regardless of the foreman's private feelings.

The three rode up to the pass and Tapscott waved his bandanna as a signal to the McCanns. There was an answering handkerchief, and presently Peter McCann and his son Lyn came out of the brush to meet them.

Chapter XVII

Enemies Meet

"MEET Miss Julia, Pete—Mr. McCann, Miss Julia. Her brother, Mr. Phil Stark—Lyn McCann." Thus Tapscott, as self-elected master of ceremonies, by way of breaking the ice of a cold silence.

None of those named acknowledged the introduction in words or by an inclination of the head. They looked at each other with chill and bitter hatred. Steely eyes met rigorously, as rapiers cross, with ruthless hostility.

But, as the elder McCann looked at Julia, there came a change in his face. Beneath the shaggy brows she caught a glimpse for an instant of his soul. It was there, during the beat of a pulse, and was gone, a look that had amazingly softened the grim countenance. Later she was to puzzle over it and wonder at it. Now she could almost have believed herself mistaken. The brown, rugged face was hard as chiseled marble.

"Well?" demanded Peter harshly.

"Doc Sanders is lookin' after the boy," Tapscott said.

"How is Wils?"

"Pretty bad, Doc says. Shot through the lung and in the side."

Not a muscle of the old cattleman's face twitched. "Can he be moved?"

"Not a chance. He's—a mighty sick boy, Pete."

"I'll go to him—right now."

Instantly Phil bristled. He would show McCann whether he could ride roughshod in this highhanded way to his end. "I'll have something to say about that."

Tapscott interposed, intent on keeping intact the truce he had arranged. "Hold yore hawsses, Pete. Tha's what we're here to see about. Miss Julia an' her brother here are actin' mighty reasonable, if you ask me. They say you can go down an' see Wils."

"One of you—not both of you," Phil cut in curtly.

Peter nodded. "'S all right. I'll go."

"You'll go unarmed if you go."

There was a moment of significant silence while the eyes of the old and the young man clashed.

"Let's get this right," McCann said. "If I go, do I go as a prisoner? Or am I free to leave when I want to?"

Phil's boyish voice lifted to a high note that was almost a wail. "My father's lying dead down there, killed by the son you're going to see. Some day we'll wipe yore whole damned outfit off the map. But not today. If you go in now you can walk out when you've a mind to."

"How do we knew you'll play fair? How do we know some of yore killers won't shoot dad?" Lyn asked.

"You don't." There was a flare of insolence in young Stark's scornful eyes. "We're not askin' him to come. It's his own say-so. It he's scared, why he can stay away."

For the first time Julia spoke, eyes flashing, lips tremulous. "We're not murderers like you."

"Now folks," interposed Tapscott hurriedly, "this is a mighty bad business all round. One thing's sure. We can't make it any better by that kind of talk. I'm dawggoned sorry myself, Miss Julia, about what's happened. I don' know the facts, but I'll bet my boots they ain't the way you think they are. I know Wils McCann. You don't. Tha's the difference. Now I reckon we got this all fixed up. You ride along with these young people, Pete, an'

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we'll stick around till we hear from you. So long."

They rode down from the pass in silence, the hearts of all three bitter with anger. In advance were the two young people, riding close together, without a backward look at their big bronzed enemy a few paces in the rear. But as they came into the valley the Starks fell back till he was almost abreast of them. They drew their ponies close to his, so that it would be difficult for anybody to take a shot at him without danger of hitting one of them.

Peter understood the maneuver and smiled sardonically. There was something amusing in this solicitude to protect him. In a day or two this boy and his allies would be laying plans to shoot him at sight.

As they came close to the ranch Rafferty cantered out to meet them. He looked at McCann with a hard, defiant gaze, but he did not say a word to him. His horse fell into place beside that of the Flying V Y owner. The foreman was between Peter and the stable and corral.

In close formation the four moved to the porch and dismounted. Together they went into the house.

Julia led the way to the room where Wilson McCann lay. After stepping aside to let his father enter, she left at once without a word. A Mexican woman was taking care of the sick man under instructions from Doctor Sanders.

"I'm making a nurse out of Ramona," the doctor explained. But his eyes were asking questions. They wanted to know by what means he had got here.

McCann moved forward and looked down at the restless figure on the bed. The young man's face was flushed. He was in a high fever and the glazed eyes showed no recognition of his father.

"Is he—so awful bad, Doc?" Peter asked, when he was sure of his voice.

"Mighty sick, McCann," the doctor answered gently. "If he wasn't an Arizona product, tough as cactus rind and clean-blooded as a young antelope, I'd say he hadn't a chance in the world. But he's liable to fool me yet."

"Don't you let him die, Doc," the father begged.

"Not if I can help it. If he lives you can thank Miss Julia. She looked after him fine till I got here."

McCann made no comment on that. "You'll stay right here with him?"

"Till morning, anyhow. We'll see how he is then."

"How about sending for a doctor from Los Angeles or El Paso? It's not that I don't trust you, but if he'd have a better chance, why——"

Sanders considered. It would be two or three days before a specialist could arrive from one of the points named. The chances were that before that time the patient's life forces would collapse. But there was a possibility the boy might hold his own. Peter McCann would feel better if he had done all he could for him.

"All right. Wire for Doctor Elder from El Paso. He's a first rate man."

Peter turned to the nurse and asked her in Spanish to bring Miss Stark.

Julia came. She stood in the doorway, straight as an arrow. Her dark eyes flashed defiantly into the light ones of the cattleman. She waited for him to speak, not asking what he wanted. And again, for an instant, she saw in his face the expression that had puzzled her before. All her life his name had been anathema to her. With youthful exaggeration she had as a child conceived him a prince of the power of darkness. Age had brought her a truer judgment, but she knew him to be hard and fierce as the Painted Desert. What was back of this look in his eyes, almost wistful and yearning, that broke through the cold mask? If it had not been for her father's body lying in the next room it would have disarmed her, for it undermined her prejudices. He was not an ogre, not a cold-blooded destroyer of her happiness. Or at least, if he was that, he was more, she suspected. She did not want to believe it, but she knew that there was a side of him human and probably likable.

"Miss Stark, I want to send to El Paso for another doctor, an' I want to stay here all night with my boy," he said.

It was on her tongue tip to tell him that he could not possibly stay, that neither she nor her brother would consider it. But her eyes were drawn past him to the stricken figure on the bed. Something in her that was deeper than hate, than the demand in her for revenge, stirred within her heart. She resented it bitterly, but she could not refuse.

"If you'll give me the message to your son I'll take it myself," she said.

Doctor Sanders wrote the telegram so that there might be no mistake in verbal transmission.

Julia took it and walked out of the room without another look at either of the McCanns. The circumstances which forced her hand were intolerable, she felt. But

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there was no escape from them. She was made to do things that looked like treason to her love for her father. But what else could she do?

Her pony was still saddled in front of the house. She rode out of the valley toward the pass, her body shaken with anguished sobs. Never before today had life seemed to her so empty and so futile.

A sound startled her. She turned, to see Stone riding just behind.

"Thought maybe I'd better drift along," he drawled. "You never can sometimes tell."

She choked down a sob and nodded thanks.

"I don't reckon I could help you any way," he suggested gently.

"No, it's—just the way things are. We have to let those McCanns stay here after—after what they did——"

The little Texan studied her a moment before he spoke. "It ain't been proved, Miss Julia, that Wils McCann did it."

"If he didn't, who did?"

"I'm not offerin' any opinion on that."

"Then why do you say maybe he didn't?"

His stony eyes were opaque. "Only a notion of mine."

"He told me he didn't do it," she replied. "But of course he'd say that."

"Would he? I ain't so sure. If he did it he'd keep his mouth shut or justify himself. There's points about this thing that ain't clear to me yet."

"What do you mean?"

"Things I've noticed."

"Oh well! If he didn't do it he knows who did. It's all the same. They were lying in wait for dad—he and his friends. What's it matter who fired the shot?"

Stone looked at her, strangely she thought, and looked away. "Maybe so."

Chapter XVIII

CUTTING SIGN

AFTER Julia had delivered McCann's message to his son she returned with Stone to the ranch. The Texan left her there and jogged down the valley along the road which Matthew Stark had followed a few hours earlier. It wandered up into the hills presently in the careless fashion of Western roads which do not have to remain on section lines but can travel all over the landscape.

Out of the brush a man rode to meet Stone.

"'Lo, Sam," the Texan said. "I asked you to be here because I want you to show me just where the old man was standin' when he was shot."

"Sure," agreed Sharp. He had not the least idea why the other wanted to know this, but he supposed he would find out in good time. If not, it did not matter. Sam was rather thick-headed. A good many fine points got by him unnoticed.

The two riders left the road at the place where Stark had hitched his horses and disappeared into the mesquite. Five minutes later Sam was showing Stone where they had picked up the body of his employer.

"Here's where he lay—an' Wils McCann was right over there. Miss Julia, she was lookin' after Wils. Say, I'm right sorry for that li'l girl. She must be a sure enough Christian, her hatin' that McCann like she does an' havin' to save his life after he'd shot her paw."

"*If* he shot Stark," the Texan amended.

"Why, there ain't no question about that, is there? Miss Julia found him right here standin' over the old man."

"Which is exactly where he wouldn't have been if he'd shot him. Maybe he would have pumped another bullet or two into him from the brush after he fell. Then he would have lit out. Looks to me like McCann heard the shot an' went to see who'd been hurt."

"Someone shot the old man. It don't look like if some of the rest of the McCann outfit did it they'd go away an' leave Wils wounded without lookin' after him."

"That's a bull'seye shot, Sam. They wouldn't. So we know Wils was alone."

"I reckon."

"Another point. Who shot Wils? Matt Stark didn't. Phil didn't. Miss Julia didn't. You hadn't got here, so you didn't."

Sam scratched his head. If this was a riddle he did not know the answer. "Blamed if I know. Who did?"

The Texan was quartering over the ground, examining it carefully. He looked up now to answer. "I don't claim to know—yet. But I'll say one thing. It ain't proved to my satisfaction that the

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same man didn't shoot both the old man an' Wils McCann."

"What would he want to do that for?" Sam asked, more puzzled than ever.

"I don't say anyone did. I say it's possible."

"Now looky here, Dave. Looks to me like you're lookin' for Mr. Killer in the brush when you already got him rounded up. I ain't talkin' about the fellow who shot McCann. But take the old man. He gives it out in cold type that he aims to kill Wils McCann on sight. All right. He hears Wils is fixin' up this head-gate an' he lights out hell-for-leather to get him. We all figure there's liable to be trouble between them an' we get busy to head it off. But we're too late. When we get here the old man's dead an' Wils McCann is standin' over him with a rifle in his hands. Great snakes! If I was on a coroner's jury I sure wouldn't bring in a verdict come to his death at the hands of a party or parties unknown. Not none. I'd name Wils McCann *muy pronto.*"

"An open an' shut case, a fellow would say first off," the little Texan agreed with a smile. "But look at the other side. McCann's rifle was full up with shells. Not one gone. Are you askin' me to believe that he was packing one extra shell in his pocket an' that he waited to put it in the magazine after he had shot Stark before coming into the open? It don't look hardly likely, *does it?* Another thing. Do you figure *two* men, neither knowin' the other was there, were lying in the brush at the same time an' about the same place to kill from ambush? Ain't that stretchin' this here long arm of coinsidence too far?"

"Well," demurred Sam, not convinced but for the moment empty of argument.

"This Wils McCann. I size him up a fighter, but a game one. If he killed Stark it was in the open. An' I don't reckon the old man was given a chance for his white alley. He was plugged when he wasn't expecting it."

"We don't even know that. Maybe they met right here an' Wils beat him to it."

"No. He was shot from that ditch likely."

"Why from the ditch an' not from the brush?"

Stone showed his companion a clump of prickly pear standing on a sand hillock. Through two of the thick leaves a neat small hole had been bored.

"Here's where the bullet went after it passed through Matt's head."

"Great snakes! I'll bet you're right."

The wrangler's forehead wrinkled in thought. "An' if it did, the fellow must a-been lying in the ditch over there or mighty close to it."

They walked over to the irrigation ditch.

"Water runnin' in it," commented Stone. "D'you happen to notice whether there was any in it when you drove across with the buckboard?"

"Nary a drop. The ditch was dry as that wash there."

"Funny. Who opened the lateral head-gate, do you reckon? An' why?"

"Ask me something easy, Dave. What the Sam Hill does it matter anyhow who turned in the water? Likely someone who needed it."

"What did he need it for?"

"Why, to irrigate."

"Might be so, but not likely at this season. The McCanns have a field of alfalfa they might be irrigating. I'd like to know if they are. You could ride over an' see, Sam."

"Sure. But why do you care?"

"I wouldn't hardly think they would be so keen on takin' care of that patch of alfalfa right after the rookus when young Wils was shot up. Here's the point, Sam, an' it sticks out like a sore thumb. The slit-eyed son-of-a-gun that shot the old man left a heap of tracks here in the soft sand at the bottom of the ditch an' in the clay just above. He had to light a shuck real sudden when Phil an' Miss Julia drapped in on him onexpected. But he was a heap worried about them footprints. So he beats it back later an' turns the water into the ditch so nobody can cut sign on him."

"You figure maybe the McCanns——"

"Did I mention the McCanns?" the little Texan asked in a soft drawl. "Well, maybe I did. If they let the water into the ditch, Sam, why they'll carry their bluff through an' you'll find it trickling all over that alfalfa patch. But if some other mangy coyote did it likely you'll find that grass still dry. Drift along, old-timer, an' have a look. I got another hen on. Adios."

Stone rode slowly up to the headgate of the ditch, his keen eyes watching the ground every foot of the way. Once he dismounted for a closer inspection. At

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the junction of the ditch and canal he went over the sandy soil and studied it almost in microscopic detail. He spent nearly an hour at this before he remounted and rode away.

CHAPTER XIX

A FAMILY TALK

JASPER STARK appeared at the Circle Cross toward evening. He swaggered into the house with the manner of a master.

Julia met him and drew him into the big room that served as the family gathering place. She could tell by his breath that he had been drinking. Yet she went into his arms and began to cry. There was no close bond of the spirit between her and this brother, but the terrible thing that had taken place drew her to him now.

"Oh, Jas," she wailed. "Isn't it awful?"

"I just heard," he told her. "Been roundin' up cattle all day to sell. Fellow told me when I got back to Mesa. I came right out."

Her memories flashed back to what her younger brother had said. "Phil thought he saw you near the Three Cottonwoods. Were you up that way?"

He swept her face with a look of quick and sullen suspicion. "No, I wasn't. Nowhere near there. Why?"

"That's where dad was killed. Someone shot Wils McCann there afterward. We thought maybe——"

"Well, you thought wrong," he interrupted harshly. "But I hope whoever shot him did a good job."

"He's alive, but awf'ly badly hurt. He was shot through the lung and the side. Doctor Sanders thinks he hasn't much chance."

"Bully! Where is he at?"

"He's here."

"Here! Whacha mean?"

"I mean he's here in the house, too sick to move."

"You talkin' about Wils McCann?" he demanded.

"Yes."

"Who brought him here?"

"I did."

He exploded in a roar of rage, in crackling oaths of anger.

When for a moment he ceased to bellow, Julia mentioned more information that added fuel to his fury. "His father's here looking after him."

"Pete McCann!"

"Yes. And there's no use shouting, Jas. Dad's lying in the next room, you know." She spoke quietly, looking straight at him.

His comment was at first both incoherent and violent. He stamped up and down shaking his big fist. It was not till he came to a specific threat that she interrupted.

"No, you won't, Jas. You'll not touch him. I told him he might come and stay."

"*You* told him. God Almighty, what you got to do with it? Claim you're boss here now, do you? I'll show you about that."

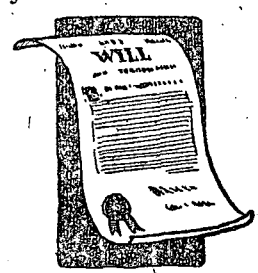
Phil had come into the room and was standing beside his sister. "Gettin' down to cases, just what d'you mean, Jas?" he asked.

"Mean? Why, ain't I the oldest son? Ain't I runnin' the Circle Cross now? You can bet yore boots I am." He strutted up and down the room triumphantly.

"We'll probably run the ranch together, all of us. But that don't give you any license to cuss Jule an' you'll not do it."

The first sentence was the one Jasper's mind seized on. "Run it together. I guess not. Think I'm allowin' to have girls an' kids tell me where to head in at? I'm boss here now an' don't you forget it."

"Are you?" The eyes of the boy consulted those of his sister before he fired his bomb. "I reckon you're mistaken, Jas. Mr. Fletcher sent his black boy, Tom, out here last night with dad's will. Right here in this room dad signed it before witnesses. Jule an' I tried to get him to put it off, but he wouldn't listen to a word."



Jasper's face had turned a sickly yellow. "Cut me out of it, did he?"

"Yes." The boy did not add that Matthew Stark had said publicly to those present that Jasper Stark was no son of his.

The older son snarled his resentment, using an expression about what his father had done that set a spark to his sister's anger.

"You'll take that back, Jas Stark, or you'll walk right out of this house," she told him.

"Will I? Who'll put me out?" the man sneered. He was beside himself with disappointment, ready for any display of bad temper and malice.

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"Don't get on the hook," his brother advised. "Say you act mean an' vicious. What good'll it do you? Soon as the will gets into court you'll be kicked out anyhow."

Jasper choked down his passion. What Phil said was true. He had no case for a fight in court. His only chance was that the other two children of Matthew Stark would reverse the action of their father. Sullenly he backtracked.

"I didn't mean to roast the old man," he apologized ungraciously. "But it's rotten hard luck. I'll say that. Jule, you an' Phil wouldn't keep me outa my share of the property, would you? That would be a low down trick, jus' because dad got sore at me an' hadn't time to forget it."

"Phil and I haven't talked this over. We haven't even thought about it." She broke into sudden passionate protest. "I'd think, Jas, you'd have the decency to forget it till—for a few days anyhow."

"Easy enough for you to talk," he grumbled. "You haven't been kicked outa what belongs to you. Nobody's done you a meanness like they have me."

"We'll do what's right, Phil and I. But you can't come here and bully us. We don't want the McCanns here any more'n you do. We hate it—especially——"

She bit her lip to keep back a sob. Both the men knew she was thinking of her father. He would never storm at her again. He would never more take her into his arms and look at her with eyes of deep affection.

"Well then, why not throw 'em out?" Jasper wanted to know.

"Because we're not savages. Because one of 'em is dying—and the other is his father. Can't you see, Jas? It's not what we want to do, but what we've got to do."

Her explanation was tearful. Why did she have to keep explaining this over and over to everybody she met? Why could they not understand?

"Folks are liable to do a lot of talkin'. I'll say that."

"Then they'll have to talk. We can't help it."

"I don't *sabe* this business, Jule," he told her, narrowed eyes full in hers. "What's back of it? What game are you playin'?"

A flush swept the girl's cheeks and died away leaving her white and still. She knew what he meant—that this was a covert insinuation of a love affair between her and Wilson McCann. A wave of nausea engulfed her.

"I think you're the most hateful man I ever knew," she flamed, and went out of the room on a crescendo of sobs.

Phil missed the point, but knew that his sister thought Jasper had insulted her. He asked a question bluntly.

"What you drivin' at anyhow?"

"Don't you get sore, too, kid," the older brother answered. "I got eyes, an' I use 'em. She's mighty high-heeled, Jule is. But she can't draw the wool over my eyes. It ain't all Christian kindness that's movin' her. Not on yore sweet life. You know what a li'l spitfire she is an' how loaded with temper. Well, she ain't turned angel all of a sudden. It's that Wils McCann. She's in love with him."

"What!"

"Sure as you're a foot high. There's something doing between her an' that lobo wolf that killed dad." Jasper nodded malevolently and triumphantly.

His brother recoiled, hard hit. "I don't believe it."

"You'll see," Jasper promised wisely.

CHAPTER XX

AN OFFER OF FRIENDSHIP REJECTED

TO THOSE stricken by grief it seems at first that death has dammed the river of life and that its channel must be forever dry. But it is of the fortunate essence of our being that life flows on in spite of us. We are swept into the current, dragged out of the eddies into the swirl of the rapids. The very detail of existence so absorbs us that our sorrow is pushed into the background.

Thus it was with Julia in the days after her father's body had been laid to rest. Her time was very fully occupied, for she had inherited the joint management of large interests. Jasper still called the ranch his home apparently, though he was of no use whatever in looking after it. He was so sullen, his frame of mind so peevish, his nerves so jumpy, that he was much more of a liability than an asset. Julia did not understand him at all. It was not only that he considered himself ill-used. There was something on his mind that made him savage and irritable.

She found it quite impossible to discuss anything with him, for almost at once he flew into a rage. His idea of justice was that Phil and she should make out a deed to him of one-third the property left by their father and should let him run the ranch according to his fancy without interference.

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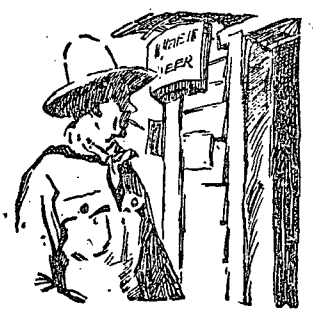
If he had been at all reasonable Julia would have been tempted to join with Phil in acceding to his demand. She wanted to be generous, to heal the breach. But she knew in her heart that if she gave way it would be weakness. She considered herself a trustee of her father's wishes and she did not intend to reinstate Jasper unless his conduct should justify it. In this Phil concurred. He knew, better even than Julia, that Jasper had flung away the reins of all self-control, that he was drinking heavily and spending his time with worse than worthless characters. In Mesa was a Mexican *tendejon* that had become a sink of iniquity where the scum of humanity gathered. It was known as Pedro's Place. Here Jasper went every morning, and remained most of the day. If he returned to the Circle Cross it was late at night or in the small hours of the morning.



Wilson McCann and his father were still at the Stark ranch. The Mexican woman made the meals for Peter and helped wait on the son. Slowly, inch by inch, the young man was beating back the tide that had almost engulfed him. His strength began to renew itself. He was so nearly out of danger that the question of moving him became imminent. The negotiations for this took place between the owner of the Flying V Y and Dominick Rafferty. The foreman's instructions were to coöperate with the enemy-guest in making the arrangements. Neither Phil nor Julia ever entered the sick room or exchanged a word with the McCanns. If they met Peter in the passage they drew aside in silence to let him go by.

On an afternoon Julia made a suggestion to Phil that flushed his boyish face with pleasure.

"Let's go see the Gifford girls. We ought to show we feel friendly. Don't you think so?"

"Sure I do. If Ann will let us."

"You used to know them, didn't you?"

"Yes, before—before Nora went away. I knew 'em right well. But now nobody's welcome there."

"And Jasper knew them, too, I've heard."

"Yep. Quite a few of the boys went there. Tom McArdle did—an' Gitner—an' I've seen Dave Stone there. They don't any of 'em go any more. Ann won't have 'em. Makes it mighty lonesome for Ethel. She's a mighty nice girl, Jule."

"Is she?"

"This is no kind of a country for her, with everybody against her except a bunch of rough men an' the bars up so's even they can't come. If you could make friends with her an' Ann——"

He left his sentence unfinished, but it was expressive enough as it stood.

"I'll try," she promised.

They rode up out of the valley toward Tincup Pass. From the distance came faint voices. The foreman of the Circle Cross was making a gather of beeves for the trail. The plaintive blatting of a calf just reached them.

Julia sighed. All of this was associated in her mind with memories of her father from the time when she had first been lifted to the back of a horse. It seemed to her she had passed none but happy days in that sunkissed valley. Now war and rumors of war filled the air. Her father was dead, her brother fast becoming a ne'er-do-well. If there was a momentary truce with the enemy it existed only because the chief of the McCanns and his son were still in their power. She could see nothing but trouble ahead. It filled the air. Even the dear boy riding beside her brooded on vengeance. Her heart was stabbed by the thought that he, too, might fall a victim to this lust for destruction.

Through the pass they moved down to the desert, following a dry watercourse to its parched and dessicated terminus. Against the drought of centuries still fought thin mesquite, clumps of cacti, some greasewood and palo verde. The horses trod over-hot sand in shallow beds, so fine in the draws that the wind had winnowed it in waves banked behind the cholla or the prickly pear.

The girl thought of almost the last time she had crossed it, in the moonlight, beside her the strong, sunbrowned man who had become anathema to her family. She had talked with Dave Stone. In her heart she knew that Wilson McCann had not killed her father. He had given her his word that he would not wage any but a fair fight. In spite of her resentment against him, she believed he would keep his word. He was master of himself, and he would run a clean race.

The horses climbed the mesa where the sheep ranch had its headquarters. The

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young people rode past the feed troughs and the corrals to the house.

A shy-eyed girl came to the door to meet them. At sight of Phil her cheeks flew a flag of color.

The boy swung from the saddle. "Miss Ethel, meet my sister Julia. She'll be right glad to know you."

Ethel Gifford's blue eyes filmed with tears when Julia came forward and impulsively kissed her. She was starved for affection. There was none of it in her life except that which came from Ann, who jealously protected her from any chance of it on the part of others.

"My dear, we're going to be friends," Julia said.

The other girl's lip trembled. "Won't you—come in?" she invited dubiously. Ann was away from home, but the thought of her obtruded. She would not like her asking the Starks into the house.

The visitors followed her into the low-ceilinged room. It was a homelike place, Julia saw in the first swift glance. In the deep windows of the adobe walls were potted flowers, geraniums, begonias, and fuchsias. They were curtained with clean muslin. A piano filled one corner. There was a small bookcase, and a set of Shakespeare held a prominent place in it. Navajo rugs covered the floor. On the mantel were photographs and a framed print of a Del Sarto madonna.

There was a moment of silence before Ethel explained that her sister was out at one of the camps. "But I expect her back any time," she added.

"I think she must be a pretty good manager," Julia said. "I hear you are doing so well. I am glad."

"If we could only sell out and go away," Ethel wistfully replied. "Perhaps we can, when folks find out we're making money here."

"You don't like the desert?" the older girl asked.

"I hate it. It's cruel." The soft voice broke.

"Sometimes," admitted Julia.

"It's—horrible. It—takes us and—crushes our lives." She flung out her hands in a gesture of passionate despair. "Folks that are good and kind—they change. And awful things happen."

"Yes," said Julia, struck by a sudden depression of sadness.

Ethel's sweet mouth quivered. "Oh, I'm sorry. I forgot—about you. I was thinking of myself. It gets so terrible sometimes—when I let myself think." She broke off. In her eyes was an expression of fear, of some haunting dread too great for endurance.

Phil's heart was very tender to this charming creature so soft and defenceless. It ached for her now. He wanted to put his arms round her and give assurance of protection against the ills she apprehended. The generous youth in him wanted to defend her.

But defend her against what? Not grief alone, for her sister Nora's death had not brought that stricken look into her face. There was something else—something sinister and evil that she felt like a shadow of disaster hovering over her life. What could it be? What had so moved her to futile and protesting outburst? Was it possible that some threat still overhung, one of the nature of which he was in the dark?

He sat there awkwardly, twirling a dusty hat between restless fingers, his back half-turned to her in the fashion of the embarrassed rider of the plains. Though he ached to befriend her, the dumbness of his tribe was on his lips. He would cheerfully have gone out to battle for her against long odds, but he could not speak a word of comfort.

"Couldn't you and your sister come and stay with us a few days?" Julia asked, her fingers caressing the soft and dimpled cheek. "We'd love to have you?"

"Oh, I wish we could. But we can't. There's no use talking," Ethel cried. "It's sweet of you to ask us though."

"Why can't you?" Julia insisted stoutly. "Your man can look after the place a few days."

"Ann wouldn't want to go. I'm sure she wouldn't."

A shadow darkened the doorway.

"Where is it Ann wouldn't want to go?"

Miss Gifford came into the room, a quirt dangling from her wrist. In an unlovely khaki divided skirt and spurred boots, a revolver cased in the belt at her hip, she looked very much a denizen of the desert. Her clothes were dust-stained, her face keen and brown. She was lean and wiry as the dogies in the hills. But she had an aspect of efficient competence.

"I was asking your sister if you and she wouldn't come and stay for a few days

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at the Circle Cross. We're—lonesome just now," explained Julia.

"No, thank you," Ann answered bluntly. "Other plans make that impossible."

"We'd so like to have you come," Julia persisted. "There aren't many of us women folk on the desert. Don't you think we ought to be friends?"

"Friends!" Ann's voice carried a laugh of scornful bitterness, a dry laugh far removed of humor. "Why not? When we have lived here two years and none of you have come to see us, when you've all treated us as though we had the plague, when you've harried our sheep over cliffs and poisoned them, when your vile men—" She stopped abruptly, to add a moment later contemptuously; "Yes, let's be friends."

"Phil and I didn't do any of this, did we?" Julia asked gently. "Oh, I know you haven't been treated right. But give us a chance now. If you're generous you'll give us a chance to make up for it. We'd love to try."

"I'm not generous," Ann Gifford replied, and in her eyes there burned sparks of anger. "The less we have to do with any of you the better pleased we'll be."

"That's plain enough," Julia said stiffly. "It doesn't leave much room for argument. If you won't have our friendship, why of course we can't give it. You seem to think all the wrongs are on one side. Have you never thought of what it means to the ranchmen to bring sheep in to destroy the range they occupied first?"

"I see nothing to be gained by discussing it."

Phil spoke. "Miss Ann, some time you might need friends, don't you reckon? You can't play a lone hand 'way off here. You ain't livin' in Denver or El Paso. You seen yoreself how it was with old Jim Yerby. He bust his leg an' would have died if sis hadn't drapped around an' took care of him. You went up there every day an' looked after him. Folks are dependent on each other in this country. You gotta have friends here. It ain't reasonable to say I won't have 'em."

"Can we pick our own? Or have you got to choose 'em for us, Mr. Stark?" Ann asked with obvious sarcasm.

"We ain't pickin', 'em. We're tryin' to say, Jule an' I are, that we'd like to be neighborly even if you don't exactly want us for friends. Miss Ethel an' you, why you need good neighbors——"

"When we're looking for someone to neighbor with, Mr. Stark," Ann cut in with a swift flare of feminine ferocity, "we'll not choose any of the Circle Cross outfit."

"Why?" Julia asked.

"I'll not tell you why."

There was nothing more to be said. Ann had closed the matter by imperative veto. Phil longed for a rehearing, but knew it would be of no use. Better than his sister, he guessed at the grounds of Ann's resentment toward the Circle Cross. Most of the cowboys visiting the sheep ranch had come from the Stark place. He had heard whispered comment at the bunkhouse. Probably she had reason to think some one of them was responsible for the trouble that had come to her sister Nora.

His troubled gaze clung to Ethel. She had curtained her telltale eyes and was looking at the floor. For her his heart was wrung. So soft and young she looked, so little able to cope with the harsh world into which circumstances had flung her. This dewy-eyed girl was by nature dependent. Since he loved her, he longed for a chance to stand between her and the buffetings of fate. Ann's attitude was unjust. He knew that. But he was still a boy, and he did not know how to cope with it.

Reluctantly he followed Julia from the house and swung to the saddle.

They rode across the mesa and dipped into a draw. Round a sharp bend they moved—and came face to face with Jasper.

The meeting was a surprise to all three, to Jasper a disconcerting one.

"'Lo, Jas! Where you headin' for?" his sister asked.

He murmured something about a calf cached by its mother while the cow went to the nearest water hole. The relevancy of this did not quite reach Julia.

"Where's the calf?" she asked.

He waved his hand behind him vaguely. "I was kinda lookin' for the cow. Figured it might be up at old Yerby's."

Neither Phil nor Julia were satisfied with this explanation, but neither voiced their doubts after they had ridden on. He was going to the Gifford sheep ranch. Both of them believed that. But why? Was it possible that in spite of Ann's

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watchfulness he could be holding secret meetings with Ethel? It might be so. He was good looking in his way. There was a swagger about him some women found attractive.

Both Phil and Julia hoped that little Ethel Gifford was not one of them. Though Jasper was their brother, they much distrusted him.

Chapter XXI

BLACKMAILING

JASPER did not ride up to the house at the sheep ranch and announce himself. He turned up an arroyo that brought him unobserved to a pocket in the hills where saguaros dotted the slope. Here he left his horse and climbed to the rolling ground above. Carefully, so as not to be at any time within observation from the house, he worked his way to a grove of live oaks in a draw. From this he could look down on the ranch.

He laced his hands around his mouth and gave the hoot of an owl. Twice, at intervals of half a minute, he repeated this.

Presently from the back door of the house a slim and graceful figure emerged. There was something in the gesture of her fine and exquisite. She was like the flowers of the desert, of the cacti and the yucca, a flag of color surprisingly flung out against a background drab and hostile. Yet she was unlike them in this; the bisnaga, the ocatilla, the prickly pear have their spines and thorns and barbs for protection, but this child had none. She was wholly defenceless, but for the quality of innocence in her that appealed to the chivalry of all decent men.

The man waiting for her in the live oak grove was not decent, and he had no chivalry. His narrowed eyes gloated over the fluent grace of her young body. He absorbed her with his gaze possessively, ruthlessly. The clean sting of shame would never touch him.

Momentarily she stood silent, her breast rising and falling fast from the climb. After one swift glance her eyes had fallen before his.

"What do you want with me?" she asked at last.

The hateful note of triumphant victory was in his laugh. "What do you reckon I want with you?"

At his voice and manner a chill passed through her blood and left her drenched with dread. She knew measurably what manner of man he was—a coward, a bully, one who traded on a girl's fears to win his way with her. But because he was what he was, wholly unscrupulous, his lower instincts in the ascendency, she knew him to be dangerous as a rattlesnake. If he were frustrated he would strike to destroy.

The look on his face sent the color flying to her cheeks. There was nothing in the armory of her innocent and girlish coquetry to protect against such grossness.

"You keep at me," she faltered. "You won't let me alone. If I had anything to give you—anything at all——"

She was considering in her mind, as she had done a hundred times, whether there was any way to raise money enough to buy him off, and she knew as she had each time decided, that there was no chance of this unless she made a clean breast of her dilemma to Ann.

"I ain't onreasonable," he said. "I'm askin' you to marry me, girl. Do that, an' what I know will be buried. Fair enough, ain't it? You'll be makin' a good deal. I'll be some husband, if I do say so my own self."

At this she flared out. "Never! Never! No matter how much you bully me."

"Think not?" he jeered. "Lemme tell you this, missie. I'm the kind of man gets what he goes after. I'm aimin' to get you like I done told you fifty times."

"I'd rather kill myself," she passionately cried, with the unconscious melodrama of youth.

"It ain't a question of you killin' yoreself, but of you sending yore sister to be hanged, or leastways to the pen for life. You'll throw in with me or I'll sure enough put her through. I never rue back. Not me." He emphasized the claim with an oath. "You can't help yoreself. I got the dead wood on you, an' I'll certainly go through."

"You wouldn't do that," she begged, one hand clasping the other small knotted fist in an agony of indecision. "No man would do that to two lone girls when—when things were like they were."

"Wouldn't I?" He thrust his face forward, lids narrowed so that his eyes were mere points of glittering light. "Grab it from me I would. I been done a heap of meanness lately an' I'm playin' my own hand."

"We've never done you any harm," she wailed.

"*Chieto, compadre!* What's eatin' you anyhow? Ain't Jasper Stark good enough for a sheepwoman?"

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"I didn't say you weren't good enough. I don't want to—to marry you."

"Why don't you?"

"Because."

"That ain't a reason."

"I don't——"

She stopped. Her mind refused to let her utter the word love even in denial to him. It seemed a desecration.

"I'm mighty fond of you, honey, more'n of any girl I ever did see." His words were suave and his manner insinuating. He moved close and put his arms around her.

She shivered, but offered no resistance. He was stronger than she. The weapon he held was one she could not parry. If he insisted on using it she must surrender, though the very thought struck all the warm joyous life out of her body. His ravenous kisses fell on cold lips and cheeks, on a soft throat line from which the pulse seemed to have died.

With a curse he released her. Ethel turned. Her sister was swiftly breasting the hill toward them. She must have seen, she could not have helped seeing, what had taken place.

Ann stood before them panting, eyes furious.

With an awkward swagger the man strode forward a step or two. "Pleased to meet up with you," he laughed. "We hadn't aimed to make any announcements yet, but since you drapped in why we gotta admit the corn."

The older sister looked at Ethel, standing there white and stricken. She did not understand, but she knew instinctively that the girl hated this bully and was afraid of him. Her fierce eyes went back to Stark and stabbed at him.

"Get off our land," she ordered in a low, tense voice. "If I ever see you on it again I'll kill you."

"Like you did Tom McArdle," he suggested significantly.

The blood ebbed from her face, but the hard and shining eyes did not falter. "Who says I killed him?" she asked, almost in a whisper.

"Why, I'm sayin' it right now, an' I know another fellow who could say it," he told her exultantly.

"You're a prince of liars," she told him. "Thought you'd got away with it, didn't you? Thought nobody knew how you'd dry gulched Tom at the cutbank? Pretty slick work, eh?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean all right."

He straddled, bowlegged in his leather chaps, fleering at her exultantly. Standing there with hands on hips, big and raw-boned, he tried to dominate her by sheer malignant force. The slim brown-faced woman looked like a child beside him, but she faced him without quailing. She might have stood for a portrait of quiet defensive resolution.

"I'm asking you what you mean."

"An' I've done told you. Plain enough, ain't it? You shot Tom from the brush, an' I can prove it."

The older sister turned to the younger. "How long has he been meeting you?"

"He came the week after—after he was killed." Ethel spoke in a low voice of distress. The pronoun of indefinite antecedent was quite clear to all present as to who was meant.

"And he has been here since?"

"Four-five times."

"Threatening you?"

Ethel nodded. The burden had been lifted to stronger shoulders than her own, and she was ready to break down emotionally.

"That he would tell—what he claims to know about me? Is that it?"

"Yes."

"If you wouldn't marry him? I suppose he does you the honor to offer marriage. Or does he?" Ann spoke in a low clear note of concentrated bitterness.

"Yes."

"I'm on the square with her," Stark said virtuously. "Tha's the kind of a fellow I am. Like I done told her already, I ain't aimin' to be anyways onreasonable. I'm here as a friend, understand."

"But if she doesn't marry you, I'm to go to the penitentiary. Is that it?"

"She'll marry me. I ain't worried about that."

"Or you'll send me to prison," the older sister persisted.

"Have it your own way," he laughed brutally.

The pupils of her eyes dilated as they blazed scorn at him. "You yellow coyote! If there's anything that walks as low as you——"

His teeth showed in a snarl. "Tha's no way to talk to me, you crazy hellcat. I got

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you where the wool's short—got you right. Get on the hook with me, an' I'll sure enough put you through. Seein' as I'm drug into it, I'll serve notice here an' now that you can't come no cock-a-doodle-do stuff on Jas Stark. Not in this year of Annie Dominick."

"Do whatever you've a mind to do. But get off our ranch and stay off. If I ever see you on it again I'll pump lead into you—as I would into a diamond back." Voice and manner were full of disgust and bitterness. She felt degraded at having to wrangle with him. It seemed to put her on his level. She was afraid of him, of what he knew and could tell, but deeper than her fear was the protective mother love that watched over her little sister, and would guard her at whatever cost.

"I'll get off when I'm good an' ready to go. But get it straight, girl. It's a showdown. I'm tellin' you. Me, Jas Stark." He swaggered into the shade of a live oak and rolled a cigarette for effect. "I'm tellin' you that either Ethel an' me take a trip to the sky pilot or you take one to the pen. Understand?"

"I told you to go," Ann warned.

"Don't run on me," he advised savagely. "I'm dangerous, girl. Don't fool yoreself till it's too late. I want the kid, an' I allow to have her in spite of hell an' high water. What's the matter with me, anyhow! What's all this big talk about? Have you got it in yore cocoanut that I ain't good enough for a damn li'l sheepherder?"

"You'd better go."

"What's the sense of all this talk? I'm makin' a reasonable proposition." He turned to Ethel. "Look here, honey. She ain't in this at all. It's between you'n me. Listen."

"I don't want to," she cried at him, a little hysterically.

"Well, you're going to listen."

He moved toward Ethel in his heavy, domineering way. What his intentions were perhaps he did not quite know himself. He meant to take her into his arms and by sheer momentum ride down her will, just how he did not know.

But Ann was taking no chances. Out of its scabbard she whipped the small revolver she carried. "Stop right where you are," she said.

His stride faltered. He stood still, taken by surprise. There was about her such an air of tense feminine ferocity that his purpose was shaken. He remembered that she could use a gun and had given proof of it.

"I wasn't aimin' to hurt her none," he explained sullenly. "Get away from here."

He hesitated, his vanity in arms. The position was a humiliating one, but he did not see any way out of it just now.

"All right. It's yore say-so," he admitted vindictively. "But don't come belly-achin' to me when you get arrested. I've done give you yore chance an' you wouldn't take it. Suits me if it does you."

He turned and walked down into the arroyo where he had left his horse.

Ethel looked piteously at her sister. "Is it true—what he said?" she asked.

Ann did not ask to what she referred. There was no need to specify. In the forefront of both their minds was the death of Tom McArdle and Ann's relation to it.

"It's true."

They stared at each other, horror in their eyes.

"I—I was afraid so," Ethel murmured. "It's been awful for me, too. I was awake when you came in that morning—and I knew something was wrong by the way you looked. I pretended to be asleep, but I saw you clean the rifle. You acted so—so kinda dead for days—like you were numb. And when this Jasper Stark came and told me one day when you were out that you had—done it—why I just knew you had."

She ended with a wail of distress.

They went into each other's arms and sobbed together. After a time, when they had cried themselves out, Ann told her story.

She had spent the night at one of their sheep camps and was riding home in the early morning when she met Tom McArdle. He had stopped her, though she had tried to push past him, and she had lashed him savagely in a spate of words for what he had done to Nora.

"I thought of her, lying out there under the ground in California, and of him riding around big as Cuffey," Ann said to her sister. "But that wasn't the worst of it. You know how he kept coming to the house—afterward, pretending he wanted to hear

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about our dear girl, and all the time trying to make up to you. You know how I told him never to come again. Well, after I had flayed him that morning he bowed and thanked me with a sneer and rode away. When he got to the edge of the road above the cutbank he called to tell me he'd be over to see you Thursday. You don't know how hatefully he said it. Something in me snapped. I didn't have time to think. I just fired at him and he threw up his hands and slid from his horse down the cutbank. I didn't wait to see any more, but just rode away fast as I could. For I knew by the way he fell that—he was dead."

"You poor, poor girl!" Ethel held the slender figure close as though to keep her from the cruel reach of the law that was going to snatch her away and lock her up for years. "Oh, darling, why didn't you tell me?"

"I don't care, if you don't hate me for doing it," Ann replied brokenly.

So, with love, they comforted each other.

Chapter XXII

"Whatever Suits You Suits Me"

IT WAS characteristic of Jasper that he did not at once go to the authorities and charge Ann Gifford with the murder of Tom McArdle. Instead, he wrote an anonymous letter to Sheriff Le Page and accused her of it.

He did not want to burn his bridges behind him. It would be better, he reflected, to see what the effect would be of a covert imputation. Hank would very likely go out to the sheep ranch and ask questions. This would frighten not only Ethel but Ann, too, in spite of the high hand she had taken with him. They might come to terms. Anyhow, it could do no harm to wait a few days and watch developments.

Most of his waiting was done at Pedro's Place, a bottle in front of him. He sat there sulkily, mooning over his wrongs and making dark threats about what he intended to do in revenge. But as the days passed he grew impatient, and decided to talk the matter over with Carl Gitner. It might be a good idea to send the big Texan up to the sheep ranch just to show the Giffords that he really had the goods on them.

The clear, pale wine of the morning air enveloped Jasper as he rode out to the Circle Cross, but the purity of a young world washed clean escaped him. He was no more affected by it than he was by the cool flecked sky, blue and silver above the cedar hills, which still kept the deep quiet of the dawn, beneath the mist, colored like the bloom on a grape. Out of the cup of such a day one might be expected to drink fine thoughts, true and lovely. But this slouching rider's mind was full of suspicion, hatred and filth. God had said today, "Let there be beauty," and no consciousness of it touched the man's sordid heart.

He had come early to see Gitner before the latter left for work that might take him a dozen miles into the hills. The Texan was not a good cowpuncher. He was a poor roper, and he did not understand the ways of cattle. Most of his life he had spent around the gambling halls of Austin, San Antonio, and El Paso. But Matthew Stark had given him employment because he knew the feud would soon become acute and a man of Gitner's type might be useful. The fellow would make smoke at the drop of a hat. He could shoot quick and straight.

Jasper pulled up at the bunkhouse and swung down. Inside he found Gitner and Stone. The former was riveting a stirrup leather.

"Come to say *Adios* to yore dear friend Wils McCann?" he jeered.

"Whajamean?" demanded Stark.

"Why, ain't you heard the good news?" Gitner affected polite surprise. "Our dear guest's done mended so much he's allowin' to hit the trail today. The old man's coming with a wagon to get him. Pretty soon, if Mr. Wilson McCann continues to improve, as the papers say, he'll be able to bump off another Stark or two maybe."

Stone was honing a hunting knife. He had acknowledged the arrival of Jasper by a nod. Now he spoke.

"Wils McCann didn't kill Matt." He said it quietly, without emphasis.

"Like sixty he didn't."

"How in Mexico you know he didn't?" Gitner and Stark had demurred together and instantly.

"I use my eyes an' my brains, boys."

"Hmp! Don' look thataway to me. He was caught, you might say, right in the act." This from Jasper, with exasperation. "What's the sense in sayin' he didn't do it?"

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"I went over the ground soon as I could, an' read sign. Wils didn't shoot yore father any more than I did."

"Phil tells me you gave her an' Jule that line of talk, Dave. Tha's why she's lettin' this murderer get away from us." He ripped out an oath of savage anger. "I've a good mind to plug him from the chaparral my own self."

"I wouldn't do that, Jas. I'd hire someone. Maybe you could get Carl," the little Texan murmured.

The words seemed to fall almost casually, except for the fact that Stone's eyes were full on those of the man he addressed. They had a surprising effect. The red of Jasper's skin faded to a sickly yellow. His jaw dropped. He stared at the little Texan with eyes grown suddenly panic-stricken.

Gitner was made of stiffer stuff. He turned snarling on Stone. "What the blue blazes you mean by that?" he demanded with a series of crackling oaths.

Stone's face was hard as jade and held as much expression. "Why, what could I mean, Carl? Only that you're a better shot than Jas, an' if he wanted any killin' done looks like it would be reasonable for him to hire you to do it."

"Say, what's eatin' you, Dave?" Gitner's eyes were closely slitted. He had dropped the stirrup leather and his hands hung free for action. "I can understand plain talk, I can. If you've got anything to say, why now's a right good time."

The conch shell of the cook sounded for breakfast.

A cold smile was on the face of Stone. He, too, was alert to the least motion of either of the men before him, and no man in the territory was quicker on the draw than this small Texan.

"Not a thing, Carl, except that the breakfast horn's done blown. Whatever suits you suits me, breakfast or—anything you say."

Slowly Gitner's rigidity relaxed. Stone had declined to force the issue. So much the better. He, Gitner, would choose his own time. "I wouldn't drap any more jokes like that around, Dave. They're liable to go off an' hurt someone, don't you reckon?" he growled.

"Maybe so, Carl."

Stone sat down on his bunk and picked up the knife and hone. He had no intention of walking through the bunkhouse door in front of Gitner. His fellow Texan was too undisciplined a ruffian, would be quite capable on impulse of pumping lead into his back.

It was not often that Carl Gitner let anybody reach the breakfast table ahead of him. He was what he called "a good grubber." But just now there was something even more important on his mind. He had to find out how much Stone knew and had not yet told.

"Lemme get you right, Dave. What makes you figure Wils McCann didn't bushwhack the old man?"

"Several things, Carl. First off, if Wils did it he wouldn't 'a' been found lingerin' around. More likely he'd 'a' been hittin' the high spots for a getaway."

Jasper spoke. "Likely he was aimin' to do that, but he made one big mistake. He came out of the brush to make sure the old man was dead."

"Why come so close? Why not take a coupla more shots from the edge of the chaparral an' then light out?"

"Wanted to gloat maybe."

"Not likely. Another point. His rifle hadn't been fired."

"Nothing to that at all. Prob'ly he reloaded."

"Not unless he was carrying just one extra shell in his pocket to reload with. Point three. I cut sign on the ground an' I know Matt was shot by someone lying in the irrigation ditch. The fellow got scared afterward an' turned water into the ditch to wipe out his tracks. We know Wils didn't do that."

"We ain't claimin' he wasn't hunting in couples. Some other of his outfit was with him."

"Think so, Carl, an' then ran off an' left Wils lying there without even takin' a shot at Phil?"

"He was plumb scared an' he hit a shuck *pronto*."

"Pass that then an' tell me who shot Wils."

A swift sidelong look passed between the others.

"How do we know?" Jasper replied.

"I'm not satisfied that the same guy didn't shoot both yore father an' McCann."

"Sounds reasonable," sneered Gitner. "Go ahead. Tell us who he is."

"I went up to the headgate an' studied the ground some. McCann's tracks were there. He'd been fixin' it. We know that. Covering his tracks in two places there was the print of a big boot run over at the heel with a nail sticking out."

The eyes of Stone and Gitner were fastened as though drawn together by power-

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ful magnets. Jasper felt a cold chill at his heart. He flashed one look at Gitner's boots.

"How'd you know which was Wils McCann's tracks an' which wasn't?" Gitner asked.

"I took his boots later an' fitted them to the tracks."

There was a moment of chill sinister silence. Not for a thousandth part of a second did either Texan relax the vigilance of his gaze.

"Did you take any boots an' fit them to the other tracks?" Gitner asked, almost in a murmur.

"Why, no, Carl. *Whose boots would I take?*"

The issue between the men had come to crisis. To Jasper it seemed that in the sunny bunkhouse a bell of death was tolling. No words were spoken. For that question was a low-voiced challenge. It called for an answer.

There was silence, heavy and oppressive, while one might have counted twenty.

Watching Gitner closely, Stone could almost read his exact thoughts. Should he draw now, and be done with it? Or had he better wait? The brutal impulse of the big man was to strike instantly, but the caution that had brought him through several killings urged him to wait. He was not looking for even breaks when he drew steel.

"Well, you know what you mean. I don't, an' I don't give a damn." Gitner turned, bravado in his manner, to Jasper. "Me, I'm headed for the chuck wagon. Get a move on you, Jas."

Stark breathed again. Carl had chosen to postpone the question of the day to a more favorable time.

The two men left the bunkhouse together. Through the open door Stone watched them walk to the eating room. He had done an unwise thing, some men would have said. At least he had done it on purpose. He had smoked them into the open. Beyond a reasonable doubt he was convinced that he had found the man who had shot Matthew Stark and Wilson McCann. He had made a guess that was a center shot.

That he had endangered his own life he knew. Gitner was a known killer. He would not rest until he had put an end to the man who knew too much, if it were possible to do it. The shot would be fired in the dark or from ambush probably, but that it would come unless forestalled was as sure as fate.

Grimly Stone smiled. He had carried his life in his hands for years. Come to that, he was something of a killer himself. But he was at one disadvantage. He had never killed, and he never would, without giving the other fellow a show for his life.

Out of the situation he got one flicker of amusement. He would be willing to give odds that when he saw Carl Gitner after his next visit to town the big man would either be wearing a new pair of boots or the heels of the old ones would be rebuilt.

(*Part III in the next issue of* SHORT STORIES)

And also in the next number:

MAC OF THE TUMBLING K

by

CLEM YORE

Hard riding son of the West was this capable stranger who started in to clean up several things about the Tumbling K. outfit.

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THE FIGHT THAT WASN'T FIT

By DEAN L. HEFFERNAN

BEFORE THAT NIFTY MIDDLEWEIGHT, KID MC KEOGH, TOOK ON BULL LOGAN, HE HAD A MORE IMPORTANT CHAMPIONSHIP TO SETTLE, AND WE MUST ADMIT THAT HIS MANAGER HELPED HIM SETTLE IT CONSIDERABLY

THIS little business of bumping through life is a hot sketch, ain't it? Kind of a case of you don't know where you're skidding, but you're on your way, hey?

Take last summer, for instance. One day I'm about the best knowed trainer of fist-flingers in the game, and they ain't a worry under the thatch biggern a microbe, except them kind, of course, which any bimbo's gota expect to have with war taxes on his neck, not to say nothing of the high cost of living in peace with the better half. And the next day what am I doing? Say, if anybody had of tried to give me the straight dope about it before it happened—meaning that I'd be tagging around after a goggle-eyed golf fan, watching him squander valuable time trying to knock the gravy outa a helpless little bit of a gutta percha ball—I'd of told him to go straddle a tree and warble like the other cuckoos.

It come about like this.

For about a year I ben handling a sweet looking young middleweight which does his jaw breaking under the handle of "Kid" McKeogh. This baby ain't got nothing at all except a eye like a auctioneer, more speed than the janitor on Christmas Eve, and a kick in both mitts which would of made a Missouri mule ashamed of hisself. He ain't equipped with no Rolls-Royce gears in the think works, I gotta admit; but, by and large, he's about the cockiest, scrappingest biped I ever got the optics on outside a bridge club or the Wednesday Women's Kind Words Society. One after another McKeogh takes on all the gimme-a-chancers as fast as they crop out and knocks them for a row of ex-tomato cans. It gets to a point where they ain't nobody between him and a maulingmatch with "Bull" Logan, the champ, except a stuffed egg which kids itself with the monicker of "Slug" Stevens.

Fin'ly the Kid mixes it with Slug in the Colosseum at St. Louie. When Slug has dozed off peaceful in the fourth, they ain't no more alibis for the champ to hide behind. Four days later him and the kid has dabbed their John Hancocks on the dotted lines, and the big row is all set to come off at Madison's Square Garden on Labor's day.

Up to that time things has been running along like they was made to orders for us. The dough has been piling up, the papers spreading the bull lavish about the stuff the Kid's got, and bank presidents shaking hands with us like we and Rockyfeller was triplets.

And then—well, you know they never was no Eden without a Eve!

One night, just about three weeks before the Kid is due to take a grab at the champ's crown, I roll in around two chimes, bubbling over with brotherly love and some good stuff I got in a little dump down around never mind where. But the first object my optics lights on, when I parks at our diggings, kind of brings me up with a jerk. It's the Kid. He's all folded up in a armchair and his chin is flapping around on his necktie. He looks like your pet Airdale after he has just been lunching offa the rat-bane the neighbors has accidentally left out on purpose.

At first I ain't able to get a word outa him with a lemon squeezer; but after about half a hour working on him he sits up and starts to groan.

"It's like this, if you gotta 'know," he tells me. "You maybe heard me mention, oncet or twict, that dame I been floating around with, Marjorie Smith."

"Onct or twict!" I yelps. "It is to snicker! My ears ain't absorbed nothing, for a month, but how this flapper's got a

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corner on all the good looks they is, and ——"

"I was out to her place, tonight," he rushes in. "I had a little plush box in my pocket and a hunch I was gona open it at the zoological moment and clinch the decision by putting the chunk of ice on her finger. Instead——"

He stops and begins to imitate a hospital again.

"When I land there," he resumes, painful, "T. Ethelbert Jarvis is already soaking up much of the limelight. He's that campus-cootie I must of told you of—the colleger I been trying to cut out. Course they wasn't nothing doing in the ring-slipping business, with him on the wire, so I just joins in the gabbing, and someway it drifted around to atheletics.

"Well, to listen to him, this Jarvis is the watchdog's teeth at all of them. Only the one thing he drawed the line at was box-fighting. A low game like that wasn't no sport for gentlemen, he says. He throwed a lot of dirty digs into my perfession. And fin'ly he says as they's only one real honest-to-Hades sport which a man should oughta go in for—golf.

"At that I loses all the controls of myself. I tell him if I couldn't go out and learn all they is to know about that squirrel game and in two weeks clean up on him and them other wolfs which is wearing out all the parks, I'd sneak out to a orphant asylum and ast the nurses to please slip me into a cradle like the other infants."

At which junction the Kid lets out another flock of groans, but flops on.

"Now, howinell, I'm asking you, was I to know Marjorie was one of them golf galoots herself? She didn't never tell me. But when I pulled that stuff, what does she do but pop outa her chair and begin prancing up and down my spinal colyum like a clogged dancer. Say, if they was anything I wasn't wise to about myself, I'm wise to it now. When she has did all her stuff, she winds up by handing me the knockout. She says she's gona hold me to that two week boast of mine. If I ain't able to trim this Jarvis in a game of golf in two weeks, I needn't never gloom her door again. And the sooner I begin not glooming it, the better, she says. So there you are, and here I am, and I hope you're satisfied!"

"Two o'clock," I says, "and all's hell, hey?"

He don't say nothing.

"They oughta be some way of vaccinating you Romeos," I throws into him, "so's you wouldn't get them attackts of eloquence. The minute you kid some animated powder-puff into thinking you got almost a human's intel-ligence, you begin making foolish noises with your mouth and hash the act. Looka here, now, I ain't gona have you wallowing around like this when the big mauling-bee is right on top of us, and me stuck for a side bet of eight thousand clinkers on it. What you gona do about this?"

"Do! They's only one thing I *can* do. I'm gona sneak out to the park, tomorrow, and waste a morning learning myself to be a expert in that cross-country billiards. Then in the afternoon I guess I'll hafta take on that egg-plant, Ethel, and give him the trimming of his life.

"Snappy idear!" I says. "A cuckoo which can hatch out one like that oughta be working in the senate. Listen, stupid, if you hadn't renigged on the school stuff

before you got outa the two-times-two-is-five tables, you'd be wise that it takes a average biped half his life to get so's he can keep the golf ball in the same county he begun beating it up in—that's supposing you hit it at all."

"Is it as bad as that?"

"You ain't heard nothing!" I says, meaning to sandpaper him clean of any idear he might of got about taking up this golf business. "They tell me a bird ain't got no chanct to learn this game without he was born with a gold golf stick in his mouth and begun knocking moth balls around the nursery the minute his legs was able to keep from doing a jack-knife."

"How am I gona get outa this swamp, then?" he asks me.

"Whatsa matter with falling back on the regular standbys?" I suggests. "Run on outa there tomorrow night with a truck load of gumdrops and lilies of the alley. Tell her the biggest bum you ever seen was the one you was face to face with when you was tying your necktie. Then spring your scrap of ice on her and she'll be hanging on your neck."

"Hanging onto your wind pipe, you poor fish!" he snaps. "You don't know this dame."

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"Maybe if I was to go out and have a talk with her—" I begins.

"Nothing doing!" he cuts me short. "If you go messing around there with that line of bull you got, I'd be offa the list for good."

"If this flapper's as bad as that," I says, waxing peevish, "you better drop her flat and jump into some good hard train——"

"Wheeze with the other lung," he comes back. "She's the real goods, and she's gona be mine, or everything's off."

"You mean to say," I asks, "that she'll hold you to that sap condition sure enough?"

"Like you hold to a thin dime," he gives me.

"And you're atchally thinking of fooling around with this nut game?"

"I gotta," he says. "Now run off and lemme recover from the sight of you."

"Say, looka here, guy," I growls, "you got just twenty days left before you're gona run a foul of Bull Logan on Labor's day. You ain't no banker to go out chopping up the parks. If you think you're gona have a easy time tickling that bruno, you better guess again while them fourth-class think-works of yours is still able to limp along on two cylinders."

"If I can't get Marjorie," he says, "I should give a hot cross bun about Bull Logan and Labor's day. I gotta get in good with her before I can be bothered about any of them other deetails. That's all they is to it."

Well, talking sense to a love-sick sap like that is the same as wrangling with the dame which fixes the holes in your socks and makes the ones in your roll. The longer it lasts the more it don't mean nothing. But it's as sure as they's landlords in Hades that, if he lets this love-and-golf mixture cut into his training and squeeze the pep outa him like it looks like it's did already, Bull Logan ain't gona leave enough of him to collect with a vacuum cleaner and a insurance blotter.

Then I happens to think of "Spike" Lonergan. Spike's a old soupmate of mine, you make me, which give up stopping punches with his jaw a long time ago and went into the atheletic supplies business out in the West End. On the side, he's been playing this so-called game named golf, a lot. He onct showed me a cupboard full of lead shaving mugs which they give him from time to time for copping some of them golf contests.

He's a kinda sour little sardine and ain't strong for learning the game to other hopefuls, but onct in a while he has been knowed to do it for a favor, if you throw in a pile of jack and a mortgage on the home sweet home besides. From them which he has wised up on it, though, he's got the rep that if he can't make nothing outa you with it, you better take up tatting.

The minute he come to mind, I seen they was a chanst for us, and I swing around on the Kid.

"Gimme your ear a minute, Brainless," I orders him. "If you gotta go in for this squirrel stuff, the best thing to do is to go in right and get it over with. Tomorrow I'm gona rustle you out to a friend of mine which learns this game to ivory-tops like yourself, and you're gona do just what he says when he says it. You get me?"

"Is this guy good?" he asks me.

"He's so rotten," I tell him, "he can learn a one-legged Igorroty to play golf in his sleep."

"Great!" chirps up this jayhoo. "I usta be a bear at croquet, and I wouldn't be supprised but what in a day or two he'll find I could show up a lotta them dubs like Chick Jones and Bob Evans, if I cared to."

AT NINE A. M. the next morning, Spike Lonergan meets us out at the municipal golf grounds, and I go through the I-wantcha-to-meet antics between him and the Kid.

"I'm gonna turn this object over to you," I says to Spike. "It useta be the maul-ingest middle-weight in the United States, but since last night it ain't nothing but a moan and a bag of mush. If you can learn the golf game to it good enough for it to trim a jayhoo named Jarvis, in two weeks, I'll throw in fifty clinkers extry over and on top of them Captain Kidd rates you made me."

"Who didja say he's gotta beat?" Spike asks me.

"Jarvis," I tells him. "T. Filbert Jarvis."

"That Bruno!" sneers Spike. "Say, the only time he ever plays the game is on the parlor sofa. I don't guarantee nothing, but if I can't learn your kid to trim him, don't throw no compliments his way like 'mush.'"

"Well, go to it," says I. "I got a hurry-up engagement at ten, or I'd stick around and see what kinda false pretenses you get money under. S'pose you gimme a ring, tonight, and lemme know how things is going."

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About eight P. M. a bellhop snares me and says they's a wild man howling for me on the phone. When I answer, it's Spike hisself.

"Listen," this bruno yelps, "I never done nothing to you, did I?"

"No," I says. "You never even insisted on me taking back that ten you cadged offa me back in 1898."

"Well, then," he comes back, "whatta you go and do me a dirty trick like getting me to promise to learn a guy golf," he sputters, "and then unloading that mess of ivory on my neck."

"Oh, the Kid!" I says. "Didn't the lesson go good?"

"Good!" he snaps. "Say, I could run out to the zoo and learn the hippypotamuses to dance the highlands fling before I could learn this bruno that the idear is to use a golf club to hit the ball with, not to slash the park all up with it. I couldn't make a golfer outa him in a million years."

"Is he so dumb as all that?" I says, mournful.

"Dumb ain't the half of it!" he comes back. "He couldn't wallop the ball smack on the nose, even if it was to talk back and call him all the names in the language! I called up to say I quit."

"Quit!" I squeals. "Didn'tcha give me your promise last night to go through with this?"

"Yes, I done that," he admits, "but if you're a gentleman, you'll——"

"Well, I ain't nothing so useless," I tells him. "I'm just a near-batty biped with a sinking ship on my hands. And you gotta save it for me. I got eight thousand clinkers on that Logan scrap, and here this kid is so saturated with the idear that he's got to win this golf contest with——"

"If this Jarvis and the Kid ever hitches up in a golf match," Spike crashes in, "you won't need to worry about no Logan bout. Just take living-pitchers of them playing and you'll have Charlie Chapling begging you on his knees not to put him outa business."

"Well, give the Kid a chanct!" I says. "One morning ain't no test."

"All right," he growls. "I said I'd do it, and I'll do it, even if I gotta go palsied and cross-eyed. But I won't like you no more."

With which he cuts me off with one of them dirty snicks in the ear like the operator shoots into you when you tell her you can't use none of them eleven wrong numbers she's gave you.

Spike don't renig on his word, though. I gotta hand it to him for that. He's always been that way, you see. Every morning he takes the Kid in tow, and if they's anything he don't give him the dope on, it's something that Spike ain't wise to hisself.

But as far as the Kid is concerned, it don't take. What Spike learns him floats in one door and outa the other. Likewise, the Kid seems to be plumb contrary about things. When he oughta be giving the ball a long ride, he makes about two feet total distance. And when it's up to him to give the ball a tiny tap into one of them little cans you gotta pocket the ball in, he pulls a Babe Ruth clout. If them little cans was washtubs, he'd of had a hot time getting the ball in with a shovel.

At the end of a week I work up enough grit to follow him around the whole golf course—what they call links. And, lemme tell you, that trip called for a gas-mask. They was maybe one or two trees his clubs didn't leave no marks on, and a few stray acres he forgot to plough up. I say there *may* have been. I ain't swearing to it none.

At that, he might have chivied the ball into all of the eighteen cans, what they call holes, in about one hundred and sixty chivies, if there hadn't been a coupla park bulls hanging onto our heels right up to the last hole. Them two cuckoos amuses theirselfs getting a lotta snappy repartee outa their system. I remember one of them saying to the other he didn't know they was putting a railroad through the park, but he was wondering if maybe a pick and a ax wouldn't of did the job quicker; and the second guy chirps up with something like he wasn't no crab to interfere with a feller having a good time, but he kinda figured they oughta stick around and see that they was a little left of the park for the nurse-maids on Sundays, anyhow.

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The Kid's so low on pep, though, he don't even try no come-backs. He pedals around droopy like. After the massacree is over, I takes Spike aside.

"Looka here," says I, "this ain't never gona do. Ain't the Kid gona get no better'n that?"

"Well, he ain't gona get no worser," he gives me. "It ain't possible. At that, he oughta have a fifty-fifty chanct with that tea-poodle, Jarvis. And listen here now, I been using up time and vocal cords on that fist-flinger of yours for a week. Ain't that enough to let me outa that promise you gypped me into giving you?"

"Not so you could notice it," I says. "And, by the way, I don't need to be no expert at this golf pastime of yours to see one thing: the Kid needs confidence. S'pose we try talking him up to hisself strong—telling him he's a double-barrel whiz-bang and a second Walter O'Hagen, and all the rest of that hop. That oughta pep him up and help some."

"I'm a married man," Spike says, "but I see when it comes to curving a lie I never been in the big league at all. You mean for me to try to kid this golf-ball hacker into believing Bobby Jones and Max Marston is a lotta bums alongsides him?"

"For onct in your life," I answers, "you got a idear without me needing no baseball bat."

Spike taps the ashes outa his mouth-stove against a tree and turns away.

"I can't figure how the squirrels ever passed you up," he says.

"Not so fast, you!" I yelps, throwing a anchor into him. "Unfold them colly-flowers on the sides of your knob a minute, and lemme see if a little sense can maybe trickle in. We got less than two weeks left before the Kid mixes it in the ring with Bull Logan. Well, you think I'm gona have him wasting valuable time out here knocking birds outa the trees? Not while I got all my sparkplugs! I figure on playing off this golf match by the end of another week at the latest. That'll leave me a little time, anyways, to try and whip what's left of the Kid into a imitation of the scrapper he us'to be. So we're gona get busy, me and you, and make him think he's——"

"A bobtailed bimp-snark," he finishes nasty. "Yeh, I heard you the first time. Then what?"

"Then," says I, "if that don't stir him up good enough so's he can flatten Jarvis, I got another idear, which will make insurance double sure.

"What's this sub roses scheme you're hatching now?" he asks me.

"I'll slip you the inside dope on that the night after he trims T. Ethel," I answers. "Meanwhile, remind yourself plentiful that the sooner this thing comes off the quicker you'll be let loose from that promise you give me. You'll start pumping this kid as full of confidence as a Ozark prohibition agent is of buckshot."

At first Spike thinks it over with his map wearing a cheery look like a undertaker which has just heard about one of his best prospects getting over the flu. But all of a sudden his face kinda comes outa the clouds. Then it gets that agonized expression on it like it always wears when he kids hisself he's thinking. Fin'ly he nods sudden-like.

"Maybe they *is* something in that confidence gag," he mumbles. "I got half a mind to try it."

"You got half a mind anyway you look at it," I says. "But I'm willing to treat you as if a whole one was throwed away on you. If you shoot the Kid full of pep and he downs T. Ethel, I'll make that bribe I promised you a hundred clinkers instead of fifty."

"You're on," he gives in. "I'll do it. I'll fill that jayhoo so full of double-strength bull he'll think he's gona pry all them golf kings outa their crowns the minute anybody turns him loose on them. That's what you're bargaining for, now, ain't it?"

"You said something," I agrees.

"Don't forget it, then," he comes back, shooting me a underslung look. "That's what you're gona get."

From that day onwards he done it, too. He throwed hisself into my game like he was mentioned in my will. I whip over a four-flush with a pretty mean break, myself, so between us we pour enough slush into the Kid's ears about how good he's getting to of floated the rum fleet. Spike has a real line, too. He's so good he even supprises me.

At first the Kid is kinda up in the air about how to take it. But we throws the hop-factry into high gears; and in a couple days he begins to fall. It ain't no time at all till he's gulped it all down hook, line and sinker.

The result is a improvement, but not such a much of a one that a guy is gona get pop-eyed over it. His confidence is slopping back in gobs, and I see he's getting to look and act more like the cocky kid he used to be. He's even starting to take

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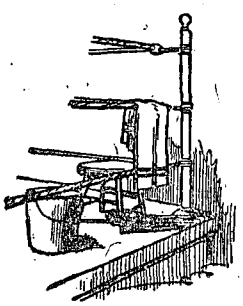
some of the burden of spouting his praises offa our shoulders. But his vaudeville stunts on those long stretches of turf, which they call the "fairway," and on those little smooth lawns where the holes are, which they call the "greens," don't look to me so good that I can take chances on kicking off them eight thousand clinkers I got on the Bull Logan affair. It begins to look like I gotta take a hand in the works, myself.

Anyways, me and Spike keeps pumping the gas into him and he swells up like your poor relations after they been feeding offa you for a week. Every time he slaps the ball where you don't hafta climb no trees or dive in a pond for it we blow about it like a hurrycane. We don't say nothing about the ones he parks in the ditches and lagoons.

The short and long of it is that the game works like a new cook. By the end of the week the Kid is so sweet on hisself he begins to make noises about playing off his match with T. Ethelbert. I tell him they ain't no use hurrying, Ethel being so good and all that; and that gets just the rise outa him I been counting on. So fin'ly I act like I give in graceful.

He calls up T. Ethelbert hisself then and tells him he's ready to learn him who's what; and that bruno comes back with one day is the same as another with him as long as it's only a question of a little practice. So the booby-hatch champeenship is all dated up for the following Tuesday afternoon.



That leaves less than a week for training for the Logan fight. But, as the Kid's acrobatics on the golf course has kept him in pretty fair shape, I figure we'll get by.

Such being fixed, I wait for a chanct and take a little trip out to the golf park without nobody being no wiser. When I get back after a little business around the clubhouse, my heart is lighter'n it's been since that Eve throwed a monkey wrench into the timing gears with this hit-and-hunt humbug called golf.

The old roll is likewise lighter.

THEY ain't no need going into deetails. It'll maybe be enough if I says that at one o'clock on Tuesday afternoon they's a little mob of six and a half people on the first tee of the municipal links; meaning me, the Kid, Spike, this dame Marjorie, and two caddys. The half, of course, is the object the Kid has gotta knock for a double row of ashcans, who's all trimmed up flossy, too, like the Sunday chicken.

The Kid is cocky but kinda do-or-die looking. This cuckoo, T. Ethelbert, keeps his nose drawing a bead on the clouds. I ain't able to make out what the flapper-in-the-case has got under her hair, but she's watching everything close. They ain't no denying, neither, that the Kid hasn't give off no reverse English about her looks. She's the platinum-plated eye-smasher, if they ever was such.

Anyways, when everything's set they tosses a coin and T. Ethel is elected to start first. This baby is the pig's tonsils for form, but he don't seem to of paid much attention to no trifle like hitting the ball. The best he done to begin with, was a pop fly to the infield.

After that the Kid comes to bat with a look on his map like if he don't send his ball over the hill and far away you can buy him at fifty marks on the dollar. But just as he's gona give it a ride, he happens to see Marjorie watching him with them big brown eyes of hers, kinda amused-like. The result is he don't do nothing when he swings his club, but wrinkle up the ozone. The second swipe he takes at said pill he done some neat excavation work. On the third strike, though, he pulls off a whaling wallop of a drive which sent the ball all of ten feet; and the war is on.

Say, I oughta lay off right now and not say no more about that sketch. If the board of Oldermen of that burg ever gets wise about who them human dredgers was which like to have shoveled their pet park over into Illinoise, I'm li'ble to be mixed up in one of them loss suits yet. But it's worth taking a chanct, I guess.

Playing that first hole of that golf course is a sorta wide-open affair, without no bushes nor trees in the way, to speak of. Both of them cuckoos manages to get in a good day's work on it, but when each has fin'ly got done rooting up the grass, and has pocketed his ball in the hole, T. Ethel admits having taken eleven wallops, and my man has quit counting after he got past fifteen. That means the Kid is one hole to the bad.

On the next hole, which is a kinda half-size affair, they both lobs the ball acrost the lagoon on the fourth try. T. Ethel's ball plops down into the middle of the

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fairway, though, while the Kid's does a wallop into the woods on the left. We all hear the ball rattling around for a while, from tree to tree like, but don't see no more of it. Just the same, when we gets around on the other side, there it is sitting pretty on the green, only about four feet from the can.

"Yow!" I yells. "Atta boy, Kid! The champ stuff is coming to a head now!"

"Very peculiar!" says T. Ethel, all stiffened up with dignity like a new butler. "Most remarkable! I distinctly heard that ball hit three trees."

"You'd of been wooden-eared if you didn't," says the Kid. "That's the way I play 'em. When you can't see the hole, owing to trees being between, bounce 'em offa the trees!"

"They's special Providences," sneers the other sod-chopper, "which looks after fools and duffers."

"If they was," comes back the Kid, "they wouldn't never of let you outa the nursery."

When we finished that second hole, half a hour later, the score is even again.

The three holes after that is them kind which you can't see the green from the starting off place—which they calls the tee, for some reason. The Kid wins them in a washout. He has a five and a couple sixes for his number of wallops per each hole respective. But after that they's a stretch of four of them bird's-eyes-view holes in a row where the greens has been left out careless right where you can see them a mile away. On them he done everything except dig up the fairway by the roots, and the score he rolls up per hole sounds like what them Dutch has gotta shell out, mebbe, cause they guessed wrong about the scuffle on the other side of the drink.

T. Ethel is busy laying out a serious of trenches on his own account, but when we get to the beginning of the home trip he's plowing along one hole to the merry, T. Ethel having copped five holes to the Kid's four. They is nine more cans to negotiate.

Spike has been keeping a eye on things like a loan shark, but, excepting for a nasty grin he slings at me now and then, he ain't did nothing to show what he's thinking of, if any. Most of the time he stays out in front. Marjorie is still trailing along, kind of watchful-waiting. Just the same I got a hunch, from the way she looks at them two Romeos, she's kinda tired of this Ethel person's ways and wouldn't of been sore was the Kid to up and cop.

After they gets started on those last nine holes, though, them pill-pounders goes to it hammer and tongues. I was glad they wasn't hardly anybody else around, cause they would of been a riot sure as they's cooties on a Airdale if them money

golfers had saw their pet links getting all changed around, as you might say. T. Ethel's specialty is flushing out them sand-pits set around the place to trap balls, but when it come to skinning the sods offa the fairway, the Kid would of made a steam shovel lay down and quit.

Yeh, I seen other links I thought was as good as that one, but I never seen none which was such a glutton for punishment from both of them contenders.

That's the way it runs for the next eight holes. Wherever you could see the green from the tee. T. Ethel romps in; but wherever they was a decent supply of woods and such, my man runs him down and backs over him as easy as the wife puts the flivver through a flock of pedestrings. The Kid has T. Ethel one hole to the bad by the sixteenth, but that jayhoo brung the match to a even-Steven on the seventeenth again with a nifty quarter-inch tap, said tap being his fifteenth wallop on that hole. The Kid was working like a beaver at the time transplanting a coupla beds of shrubbery on the sides of the green.

That brings us to the start for the eighteenth can with the scores still nobody ahead.

Still and all, I gotta admit that as T. Ethel takes his stands for this last hole, I ain't feeling so satisfied with the way things has went as I been counting on. The Kid's got a lotta pep back now, but I knows that if the other clown should happen to wallow in with a win, it's gona send my training plans for the coming week higher'n the price of bottled-in-bonds. When Mr. Kid McKeogh has made his mind up about something, like he has did about this business of trimming T. Ethel, he ain't no harder to change than a flock of them birds which is noted for long ears and a bray.

Anyways, T. Ethel fin'ly gets through

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fixing his necktie pretty, and wiggles his wrists and shimmies around with his bat, a coupla minutes, like the libary of golf etiquettes says you should oughta. Then he lets fly.

And, say, for the first time in his existence, I guess, this dumb-bell supprises hisself by pulling off a honest-to-Hades wallop. The ball whistles off straight as a arrow, plunks down in the fairway a mile ahead and skids right along. When it comes to a halt, it's clean along past the trees and right in line with the green to the side. It's one big drive!

The way to this hole, you make me, is one of them right-angles layouts. They's a bunch of woods straggling along the edge of the course, with a lake tucked away coy back of 'em, the idear being to give nervous perspiration to any of them golf bugs which ain't got enough troubles as it is. The hole is acrost on the other side. They's just about only one way of getting there, and that's to sneak along past the trees like T. Ethel done. Then, playing at a right angle to your first shot, you got a easy bunt around to said hole.

That'll maybe explain why, when I seen the Kid stepping up to bat, my pedal extremes, as they says, begins to pull off a imitation of a pair of ice-bergs.

But this jayhoo ain't got sense enough to see he's in Dutch. He just slings a contemptible look after T. Ethel's ball, gets hisself planted and hauls off. They's a smack, and then the pill is scooting through the ozone snappy as a cigarette drummer outa Kansas.

At first it acts like it's gona be the twin of T. Ethel's, but it ain't went half the distance when it takes it into it's head it oughta drop over and see what's doing in them woods. When last visible to the nude eye, it's taking a short cut through the top leaves of a elm up near the point.

Well, I hustles on over there and when I don't see no sign of the pill around, my heart starts flapping against my palate. That ball is sure obnoxious by its absence.

To make it worser, after we been hunting it a while, T. Ethel prances over with a smirk on his frontpiece like the Angora which has been sampling the goldfish.

"Lost?" he chirps. "Too bad, don'tcha know! By the way, may I suggest that you've used up three and a half minutes, my good feller. If you don't find it at the end of five, you know, you're obliged to forfeit the hole—and the match, not having drove a alternative ball."

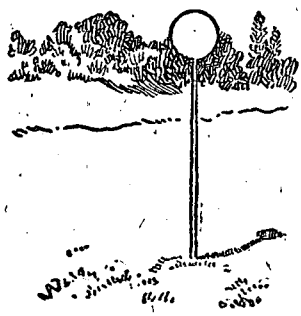
But just then some bozo which has finished playing on the green yells acrost the lake:

"Hey! You looking for a ball?"

"Course not," I bellow back. "We're hunting for a pipe-organ so we can sing the squirrels to sleep."

"What kinda ball you shooting?" the other guy comes again, not making me.

"A Baby's Dimple brand," I tell him disgusted.



"Well, they's one here," he says. "Better come over and take a look at it."

He don't hafta say so twice. In a minute we're all but standing on his corns.

The Kid turns the pill over in his hands.

"Yeh," he says, "it's mine, all right. Where was it?"

"In the hole," this guy tells him. "We found it there when we was getting ours out."

"In the cup!" squeals the dame which brung about all the troubles. "Why, Kid—Mr. MeKeogh—that means you must of made it in *one!*"

The Kid stares from her to the ball with his eyes getting more and more like a pair of beanery saucers every minute.

"One!" she busts out again. "Think of it! Why, the last time Chick Evans was here the best he could do on this hole was a four. Kid, you're—you're wonderful!"

"Wonderful ain't the half of it," says Spike, crashing into it with a left hand grin in my directions. "It's increditable! Specially considering that this hole is 380 yards. But it just goes to show what a feller can do which has got high class stuff in him. Yessir, I wanta be the first to slip my congrats to the boy which is gona be golf champ of the whole United States and Belleville!"

With that the Kid begins to come out of the trance. He kinda stares at Spike like he just thought of something.

"Yeh, I guess you're right," he says. "That shot wasn't nothing, though. I been holding it back all afternoon. Next time I'm gona do it in *none*."

Then he turns to this flapper, Marjorie, cool as a Eskimo, pulls her arm through his and starts towing her away.

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"Come along, Marjorie," he says—and I draw a regular breath, at last, when I see he's got all the earmarks of the guy he used to be before he got bit by the golf bug. "I got a lotta things to gas with you about. Besides, I wanta tell you about a decision I just come to this minute. It's gona give you the supprise of your life! Are you for me now?"

Was she? The answer is total yes.

As soon as them two has disappeared into some woods, à la arms in arms, leaving T. Ethel with his chin sagging down so far it's libel to come off any minute, I swing around on Spike.

"Well," I warbles, "you stood by me like a brother in this nut-curing business, Spike, and I'm gona show you I'm a bird which depreciates his friends. Drop around to my diggings about seven-thirty. You're gona get the swellest feed you was ever supprised with, and after that I'm gona pay you every thin dime of the ransom I owe you."

"All right," says this grateful bruno. "Only see that when the soup-spiller drops around with the bill, you don't get paralysis of the paw like you us'ta."

WELL, Spike ain't the kind to pass up no refreshment he don't have to shell out for. He's on deck right on the dot. And I'm feeling so relieved at the way things has went through, I don't stop at nothing. Fin'ly we winds up in my room, about eleven cuckoos, with a quart of the stuff which made Volstead unfamous between us.

About half a bottle later, Spike begins showing signs of making noises about money. So I trot out what's left of the roll, squeeze off twenty five-spots, and pass them over.

"All's well as ends well," says I. "I'll hand it to you for being the best boob-learner in the business, Spike; but when it comes to making a champ outa nothing but a block of ivory, you gotta take off your top-piece to me and my roll. Know yet how I done it?"

"Think I'm as dumb as you are?" he says. "How many of them caddy boys didja bribe to keep hiding out ahead of us and throwing your jayhoo's ball onto the greens—not to go into no particles about kicking Filbert's into them sand-pits. I counted four."

"They was only six of them ball finders," I grins, "but they done their work like a army of income-tax inspectors. They had me kinda up in the air for a while on that eighteenth hole, but looka the way they come through! If it wasn't for them, the Kid's last one would still be at the bottom of that lake."

"Would still be!" he sneers. "It is. I seen that little midget take one of them extry ones you must of gave him outa his pocket and slip it into the can. He ducked back into the bushes just before Ethelbert come out from behind them woods, and ——"

He interrupts hisself for a coupla minutes to count over them five-spots, giving each one the up and down, fore and aft.

"They looks O. K., but I'll work them off on some dumb-bell soon as I get a chanct," he says, stuffing them into his pocket. "Well, is the party over?"

"Say, what was you expecting for the next to nothing you done?" I says peevish.

"I just wanted to be sure," says this Shylocks, "cause if I already got all the gravy you was blabbing about coming acrost with, I ain't libel to lose nothing by wiseing you up on something. Was you thinking of giving the Kid a hot workout tomorrow?"

"No," I says fervent; "just one that'll take the skin offa his eyeballs."

"Well, you better think again," he tells me.

"What're you gibbering about now?" I asks.

"Listen," he says. "Ain't you the bird which told me to fill that jayhoo full of condensed hop about what a whistling whiffenpoof he was gona make as a golfer—about how he was gona slap Walter Hagen and Jim Barnes and all them champs for a row of used ash-cans the minute he was tied loose on them?"

"Yeh," I admits, grinning. "And I'm willing to give out as you done it, too."

"I know I done it," he says, throwing me another of them underslung snickers. "This," he says, pulling a sheet of yellow paper outa his pocket and shoving it over to me, "will prove I done it. It come to me about a hour after the golf contest was over. Read it and weep."

I takes the paper and gives it the quick onct-over. Then I bounces outa my chair like a rubber ball. This scrawl runs:

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Dear Mr. Spike Lonergan:

Me and Marjorie has elopped, and I'm writeing this just before our train pulls out the station. After that game I played, today, I seen you was right and what a ass I been to of ever wasted my time in a vulgar perfession like box-fighting. Marjorie thinks the same, only more so. So me and her is gona hurry on East so as I can enter the national champeenships and show everybody what a lotta bums them guys like Chick Barns and Jock Evans is.

Tell that dumb-bell which calls hisself my manager he can go fight Bull Logan hisself, for all I care. I'm ditching that cheap game for good.

The next golluf champ,
Kid McKeogh.

Say, after absorbing that wallop on the soldier plexes, I just stand there for a coupla minutes with my eyes ready to come out like the cork outa a popgun. Fin'ly I flop into my chair helpless.

"Hashed again!" I groans. "Now whatinell could of ever put such a idear into that jassack's dome?"

"I mentioned it to him, myself," says Spike, getting up and grinning like a gargoyle. "Figured I might as well, long as I was giving out all the rest of that hop you ast me to fill him up with. But I couldn't hardly of put it over if them young hirelings of yours hadn't went and overdid the crooked stuff with that hole-in-one blarney. That clinched it. Next time you dump a carload of ivory on a guy's neck which is supposed to be your friend, and he asts you to please lay off, you'll maybe have a heart!"

"BIG TIMBERS"

ALONG the northern or mountain branch of the old Santa Fé Trail, on the north bank of the Arkansas River about thirty or thirty-five miles below Bent's Fort, was a large grove of cottonwoods, known as Big Timbers, extending for some miles along the river. This was a famous gathering place for the Kiowas, Arapahoes, and Cheyennes, the three friendly prairie tribes, when winter threatened them. It gave them protection against the cold winds, afforded fuel for their fires and cottonwood bark for their ponies, a fodder which was very nutritious. To Big Timbers came the traders from Bent's Fort, and William Bent went there often to talk with his Indian friends and the Indian mother of his wife. Ruxton and Garrard both spent some days in this winter encampment and tell us of the winter life of these tribes. This practice of peeling the bark from the trees eventually killed them and left them standing dead in a dead forest.—C. E. M.

RAINY WEATHER POWDER

"TRUST in Providence and keep your powder dry" has become another of the world's handy sayings which time—and science—have made it necessary to revise. From now on, wet or dry, powder will serve its purpose equally well, for the War Department experts have perfected a kind which they say can be exposed indefinitely to any moisture saturated atmosphere without any effect on its well known punch. In fact, this new powder has been completely submerged in water without absorbing any moisture or losing any tendency, on proper provocation, to go off on just as big a bust as it ever did in its dryest days. It is also flashless and smokeless. The only thing the experts have failed, as yet, to eliminate is its noise. If you must get blown up, you will still have to stand for the racket.

FURNITURE WIRED FOR ELECTRICITY

QUITE the newest thing in house furnishing is to have every piece of furniture wired for electric connections. A bed, for example, is equipped with plugs to which may be attached a reading light, an electric heating pad and an electric food warmer in case one wishes breakfast in bed or is ill, while easy chairs have attachments so that the reading light can be fastened to the chair instead of on a separate table or stand. Dining room tables are equipped with plugs not only for the center light but for the electric toaster, percolator, etcetera. The National Electric Light Association has prepared complete specifications for the wiring of all sorts of furniture for electrical connections.

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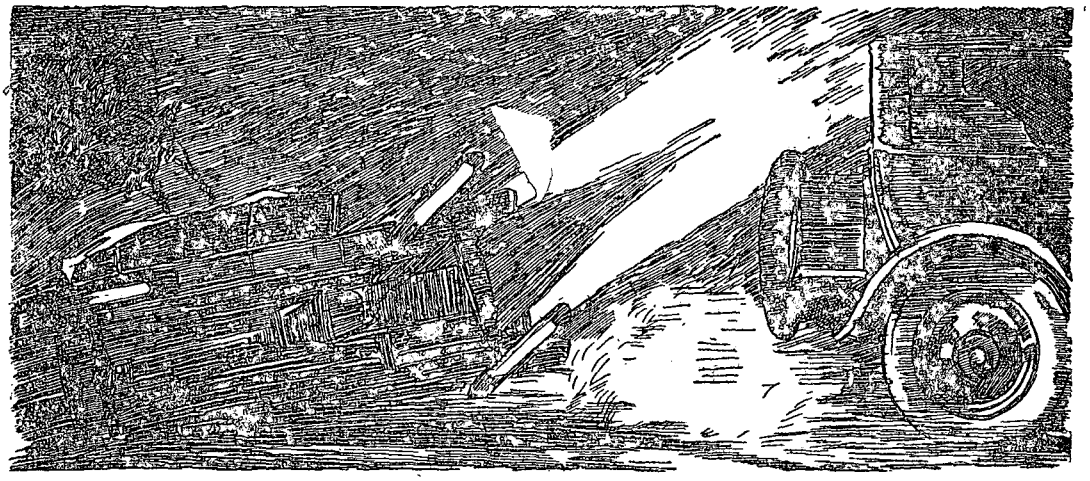

THE TWO SPOT

By ALBERT W. TOLMAN

TWO PATROLS THERE WERE ALONG THE ATLANTIC SEABOARD —AND CROSS CURRENTS SEEMED TO FLOW BETWEEN THEM

ELEVEN on a foggy June night found Val Horton tiptoeing up the black tunnel of Argentine Wharf after a busy, anxious vigil in the *Sea Hound*. He eschewed the plank sidewalk and took the muddy road, not because it offered the best walking, but because it promised to be safer for the worst hated lobster-warden on the Maine coast.

Horton was over six feet tall and heavily built, with iron muscles and nerves. Though the evening had thus far proved satisfactory, he had a round half-dozen reasons for proceeding with unusual care. His hand clutched the butt of an automatic in his side pocket, and he kept his ears and eyes wide open, darting keen glances right and left at the narrow pitchy alleys between the malodorous fish-markets and junk shops. Not until he emerged into the misty glow of the electric light on Front Street did he relax to light a cigar.

A ford touring car popped suddenly out of the fog.

"Oh, Horton!" hailed a familiar voice. "Just the man I'm looking for!"

It was Special Immigration Inspector Stanley Doane, short, chubby and light-complexioned.

"I've a hunch something'll be doing in my line tonight, and I need a good backer. Jump aboard!"

"Chasing Chinks is off my beat," replied Horton. "I believe in every shoemaker sticking to his own last. Besides, I've had a hard day on the water, and I'm done up."

"Did you nab Frank?"

"Damn Frank!"

"Ah, come along!" begged Doane. "That's a good fellow! Here's where I nail Lee Fu!"

The warden pondered, his black eyes sombre. Of course it would be a wild-goose chase, like the others. So why not humor the immigration man? He got aboard.

"We'll stage a real man-hunt," boasted Doane.

Horton grinned aside; he had heard such talk before. But his smile died, and his eyes grew stern, as the inspector detailed the grounds for his hunch. This time, perhaps, Doane might actually make his word good.

For almost an hour they prowled pantherlike through the business section. The thick fog that had muffled the city since dusk was driving seaward before a rising west wind. As they turned into Canton Street, the Merchants' Bank clock chimed quarter to twelve. The inspector gripped Horton's arm.

"There!"

A big car, its red rear-lamp unlighted, whisked away from Lee Fu's laundry into

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the mist, but not before the Ford's shimmering beams had revealed a startled yellow face staring from the back window.

"That's Lee Fu's car!" exclaimed Doane. "And jammed with Chinese! We'll make a killing!"

He jerked the gas-lever, and the Ford leaped forward. On through the almost empty streets they rushed, catching occasional glimpses of the fleeing car. The Ford bounced and skidded; it rounded corners on two wheels; it shaved other autos by a hair's breadth. Policemen shouted. Rare pedestrians dodged.

Excitement smouldered in Horton's black eyes. Lee Fu could certainly drive, but so could Doane, even if he was a little, white-headed dude. And he had nerve in a pinch. His hands on the wheel did not tremble.

At last it was evident that they had lost track of the larger car. The warden drew a long breath.

"He's gone! You'll never catch him!"

"He's my meat," muttered Doane. "He'll strike for Boston. I'll cut him off on the Stratford pike!"

Presently they were tearing along through the open country. The moon had not yet risen. The stars burned faintly through the thinning fog. Minute after minute passed, and still no car ahead. Doane was driving the Ford to its limit.

"Lost him!" said the warden.

"No! Look!"

Their head lights flashed back from glass and shiny leather, far in advance; but no red lamp glimmered. Once more they had picked up the Chinese car.

The car with the two officials plowed, skidded, darted, plunged, but still it went, obedient to the blond speed-maniac at the wheel. Though a seasoned officer of the law, Horton was shaking with excitement. He gnawed his heavy mustache, and his iron fingers tightened spasmodically round his automatic.

"We've got 'em!" snapped Doane.

Foot by foot they were overhauling the other car, now barely a hundred yards ahead. The cooler and more determined Doane became, the more nervous grew Horton. He had laughed at the inspector an hour before, but he did not laugh at him now.

The hundred yards shrank to seventy-five, to fifty; the fifty, to fifteen.

The crisis was at hand. The warden's brain was in a turmoil. What should he do? He cursed his luck for having allowed himself to be dragged into such a mad scrape. He was a salt-water man; he knew motor-boats, but not automobiles. If he had only stuck to his lobsters and never meddled with Chinese!

Horton was no coward, but he was in a blue funk. The fugitives would never yield without a fight; there was too much at stake. His anger flared hotly against the remorseless little inspector, who was running them both into big trouble. Doane couldn't use his gun while steering. Horton might have to shoot first, and he didn't want to.

Steadily the gap lessened. Steeling himself for the coming tragedy, the warden half drew his pistol.

A mellow light suffused the east; the moon was just rising. They tore through a little village, and came suddenly down into a clammy fog-bank on a salt-smelling marsh. The big car slackened its speed. Horton knew why. A bad curve!

He caught Doane's arm. "Slow down!"

With an oath the inspector shook him off. The Ford leaped forward beside the other car, which was crowded with dark figures. There was a clicking of hub-caps.

"Surrender!" yelled Doane.

Without warning the larger car swerved sharply to the right. Doane tried to follow. The leading machine, more heavily loaded, stuck to the road; but the light Ford was going too fast.

It tilted up on two wheels, hung in the air for a moment, and then went off the highway, rolling over and over on the soft marsh.

PAINFULLY Horton came to himself. He was lying on the damp grass, partly under the overturned Ford. As his senses returned, he remembered where he was, and how he had come to be there. A distant church clock slowly chimed midnight. Mosquitoes hummed about him; and across the marsh boomed a full-throated chorus of frogs.

Horton's head was aching; his joints twinged as if they had been wrenched apart. His face smarted; he put up his hand, and took it away covered with blood. He felt himself over, until he was satis-

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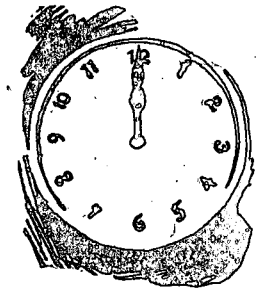
fied no bones were broken. The strain of the chase was off; so great was his relief that he actually smiled.



And Doane? He lay close by, motionless.

The warden touched his associate's body. Was he dead? No; his heart was beating. Horton dragged himself out from under the wrecked car. The mist had blown away. The low moon was just above the eastern horizon.

It was hard work for Horton to get Doane's limp body clear of the machine, but at last the inspector sprawled on the grass, disheveled and insensible. His face was scarred and bleeding, his clothing torn. Horton scowled.

"You damned fool!" he muttered.

Doane, waking from unconsciousness, smiled up at him—a good loser.

"Well," he said, "Lee Fu sure put it over us!"

"How did you know it was Lee Fu?"

"Never mind now. But I know. He's miles away by this time."

Down the road taken by the car of the Chinese wheezed and clanked an ancient Ford truck, loaded with laundry bundles, bound for the city. Horton's hail brought it to a stop. The driver dismounted. He was Lee Fu!

For a moment Doane and Horton were dumb with amazement. The warden was the first to find his tongue. He explained; Lee Fu commiserated them. He helped the castaways aboard his car, and took them back to the city.

Few words were exchanged on the trip. At last the Ford stopped before Doane's lodgings, and the inspector got out stiffly.

"Much obliged for the ride; but say—*next time!*"

The oblique inscrutable eyes expressed innocent wonderment.

"What mean by next time? No savvy!"

TAKEN by and large, the Maine coast between Haskell's Point and Cape Turnagain was an interesting place. There was all sorts of easy money to be made, if one cared to make it. A rum-ship cruised in the offing. Now and then a hydroplane, freighted with forbidden juice, whirred down. Occasionally, a summer cottage was robbed and burned. A score of fishermen in twice as many miles pulled their neighbors' traps and trawls, and sold short lobsters to the Massachusetts smacks. Then there was the smuggling in of Chinese.

By day the coast drowsed; by night it got busy. Code signals winked from outshore cabins, and beacons, quickly extinguished, blazed on lonely points, weaving a web of intrigue. Spies lurked in fish-houses and ground-juniper clumps, watching other spies who were watching boats. Predatory autos scurried along country roads, and stealthy launches came and went without lights. Again, some nights seemed as still as a farm in the back woods.

No other state officer was held in such dread by short-lobster dealers as Val Horton. In five years he had turned thousands of dollars in fines into the county treasury, and he had a most uncanny habit of appearing at unexpected times and places, despite fog and storm and darkness.

His speedy *Sea Hound,* with her quadruple expansion engine and under-water exhaust, was better than twenty knots. In his brain was a map of the coast, its rocks, shoals, channels, hiding-places. He knew every lobster pound and car, where every fisherman lived and trapped, where he sold his catch, and what he did with his money. He was hard, cynical, almost vindictive in his enforcement of the law, and notoriously honest. Nobody had ever tried to bribe him but once; the rumor of what he had done with his fists to his tempter discouraged other trials.

"Not enough shorts 'twixt here and hell to buy him up," was the unanimous opinion.

Would-be lawbreakers told one another profanely what they would do to him, if they had the chance. Three or four times he had barely escaped stopping a bullet; and his assailants had come near finding out that he was as good with a gun as he was with his fists.

Save for Fred Travis, his engineer, who was possessed of similar traits, Horton had few intimates. His association with the state and government officials might be termed professional rather than social. From his viewpoint, the men sent by Washington to break up Chinese smug-

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gling were jokes in an ascending scale. Inspector after inspector came, saw, was conquered, and departed with a puzzled, defeated look in his eyes and the corners of his mouth turned down disconsolately. The department grew desperate. At length it presumably played its trump card; and along came Doane.

Horton was frankly disgusted, as he eyed this new arrival, who weighed under a hundred and forty, measured less than five feet five, and had a tow head and fuzzy yellow mustache. Nor did two weeks acquaintance tend to change Horton's mind about Doane's ability. If anything, the new man seemed unusually helpless. Still, he was a good fellow; and the warden did what he could for him, loaning him his own private chart of the coast, and taking him out two or three times in the *Sea Hound*. At the same time he was impressed with the fact that Doane had a one-track brain; he thought and talked of nothing but Chinese. Horton grew a little tired of such constant harping on a single string.

The warden had his own unsolved puzzle in Dago Frank, a Portuguese who some months before had hired a shack on Button Island five miles down the bay. From the outset Horton had been suspicious of him; under the oily smiling exterior of the stranger lay something he could not fathom. So Frank was to Horton what Lee Fu, who had his business on Canton Street, had been to the immigration men. They suspected that his laundry was the first station on the underground railroad that ran the Orientals inland. The warden had learned, too, that Frank had fallen into the habit of having considerable work done at Lee Fu's; but he had found nothing to connect the Portuguese with the smuggling of Chinese.

"I'll get him, Horton!" Doane slammed his fist down on his chair-arm. "I've never failed yet."

It was a fortnight after the inspector's arrival; and the two were smoking in his office in the third story of the Custom House. Though the June evening had waxed late, the lights had not yet been switched on. The open window commanded harbor-front, islanded bay, and long, electric-starred Cape shore, beyond which was the gloom of the open ocean.

Doane talked. Horton listened politely in his dusky corner, his eyes twinkling with secret amusement. Leisurely he blew invisible smoke-rings, as he took the measure of his open-hearted host, so confident of succeeding where his predecessors had failed.

"At one last Thursday morning," the inspector's fore-finger beat the words out against the darkness, "seven yellow devils pop into Lee Fu's, and pop out again before daylight."

"That's where I have my shirts and collars done," commented Horton.

"Biggest single batch ever run into this port," continued the inspector. "How they came, or how they went, I don't know; only I'm dead sure they were there."

"Same night I nabbed five hundred shorts."

"Just think!" fumed Doane. "Seven chopstick-twiddling heathen slip in under my very nose. Fine send-off for me, isn't it? By now they're probably scrubbing shirts in New York or Chicago. About as easy to identify as seven particular bacilli in fifty thousand. The only thing to do is to plug the leak good and tight."

He began pacing the floor.

"It's like this. They land at Vancouver, pay five hundred dollars Canadian head-tax and work across the continent to St. John or Halifax. An agent of the Underground spirits 'em aboard a fast fisherman. She runs along the Maine coast, dropping 'em by night wherever it's handy. Dozens have been landed at this port the past few years. The government doesn't get wind of it until it's too late."

"And you think my laundryman's mixed up in it? Why, his walls are plastered with Bible texts."

"Sure! I spotted his joint before I'd been here three days. Phone! Electric lights! All the modern fixings. Oh, Lee Fu's up to date! An auto, too. Mighty convenient for smuggling men!"

"Pretty smooth, eh?"

"I'll say so. Of course he's got a white confederate. Agent of the big companies with plenty of cash. He's the x in my problem. I'm here to match my brains against his. Between you and me, warden, in ten years I've never been beaten. Sooner or later the lawbreaker is bound to be caught."

"As a general thing," conceded Horton.

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"Sayers told me that you know this coast like a book."

"I've seen something of it in the last five years."

"I'll want to consult you now and then. Kindred lines, you know. I expect to spend a good many nights cruising about the bay. Perhaps we can help each other."

"Glad to do what I can, I'm sure."

Horton chuckled inwardly. The new inspector was vastly amusing.

"Warden, who about here might be lending a hand in this smuggling?"

Horton pulled his bushy black brows.

"I don't like to suggest names," said he guardedly. "It's a pretty serious thing, a blamed sight worse than short-lobstering. I know every man and boat for twenty miles east and west, and I could mention offhand a dozen, capable of almost anything. I suppose there's good money in it."

"At least a hundred dollars a head."

"Whew! No wonder somebody's willing to take a chance! Say, I *will* put you wise to one fellow."

The warden told Doane about Dago Frank.

"He's a bad lot, shrewd and slippery. Pretends to be lobstering and fishing. So far, I haven't been able to get anything on him, but I'm sure he's crooked. He's got a boat almost as fast as mine; and that makes me suspicious. An honest fisherman doesn't need a craft that'll make over fifteen knots."

"I'll look him up," said Doane.

He snapped on the lights.

"Warden, why not be sworn in as special inspector? It'll pay you well."

Horton smiled, as he rose to go.

"No, thanks. This is my busy season. Summer boarders like short lobsters, and the Massachusetts smacks run down here pretty often. But if I see anything suspicious, I'll keep you in mind."

All the way to Argentine Wharf Horton laughed to himself. He decided that a very short yardstick would measure the new inspector. Running out of the harbor that night, he unbosomed himself to Travis.

"If Uncle Sam wants to break up Chinese smuggling, why doesn't he send a man? This fellow's all tongue. He's an easier mark than Speke or Davis or even Sayers. Stop the leak? Guess he'd better find it first! One thing I like about you, Fred, is that you know enough to keep your mouth shut. Lawbreakers get caught sooner or later, eh? Pretty blamed late, if it depends on an officer like him!"

The warden overlooked the fact that, while some men conceal their thoughts by silence, others accomplish the same end by much speech on non-essentials.

THE morning after the fruitless automobile chase the *Sea Hound* lay in her berth beside Argentine Wharf. Travis, silent and efficient, was overhauling his engine, while Horton, puffing one of Doane's Perfectos, lived over the man-hunt.

"Actually, Fred, I was stumped. I didn't know what to do. If that curve hadn't come along just in time, we'd have overtaken 'em, and then the very devil'd have been to pay. Somebody'd have been shot, sure. Never again, Fred! The salt water's good enough for me. Next time I'll know enough to be so busy I can't accept invitations to any automobile parties. Ouch!"

He rubbed his neck tenderly.

"I was a fool to ride with a fool like him!" he concluded.

Fred salvaged an ample plug from his hip pocket, and bit off a life-saver.

"You sure were," he agreed.

Ten days passed before Horton heard from Doane again. Then he got a telephone call. "Drop up, won't you?"

The warden dropped up. He found Doane pacing the floor like a caged leopard.

"Smoke on Uncle Sam!"

Horton helped himself from the proffered box, stretched back in his chair, and began to blow curling rings of blue vapor.

"How's everything?"

"Rotten!" fumed Doane. "Last night four more Chinks slipped through Lee Fu's!"

"No!" sympathized the warden.

"Fact! And just as I felt certain I had that rat-hole stopped. Bah! It makes me sick!"

Horton laughed in his sleeve. As if anything better could be expected!

"Give me a boost, Horton," Doane begged. "I've always made good before, and I want to this time. Help me out, old man, and I'll make it worth your while."

Unemotionally, Horton's hard black eyes met the other's pleading blue ones. He exhaled a big smoke ring.

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"Mighty glad to help you, Doane, if I could; but this summer my hands are tied. By fall I may have more time."

The inspector's face fell.

"I'm liable to be shifted before then."

"Not so soon as that, I hope."

Doane pulled a paper from his pocket.

"I'm showing this to nobody but you. Here's my list of suspects."

Horton scanned it with interest, his eyes widening. He pointed to the third name.

"You don't mean to say you've got anything on *him!*"

"Why not? A man may be a bank director, and still be crooked."

"Come out with me tonight," invited the warden suddenly. "I've laid a trap for Dago Frank. If he springs it, it'll cost him a fine that'll break him, or land him in jail."

"Tip-top! Perhaps I may get hold of something useful to me. Take half a dozen of those cigars!"

As they reached the sidewalk, a big car whirled past, a yellow face bending over the wheel.

"There goes Lee Fu!" exclaimed Doane. "It's a bet that car carried some passengers last night that Uncle Sam'd like to get hold of!"

As they walked along Front Street, Horton touched the inspector's shoulder. "Sst! Frank's just turned into that clothing store right ahead. Let's see what he's up to!"

After casually inspecting the display in the window, they stepped inside. Frank was paying for a slicker with a ten-dollar bill off the bottom of a thick bankroll. The money quickly disappeared, as he caught sight of Horton and Doane. With an insolent laugh he threw the coat over his arm, and left the store.

"See you later, boy," muttered the warden under his breath.

"Notice how quick he shoved those bills out of sight?" Horton asked Doane, as they walked along the street. "Lots of easy money coming from somewhere, when Chinks sport touring cars, and lobstermen flash rolls that would choke a horse."

They separated at the next corner.

"I'll be on Argentine Wharf at eight," promised the government man.

"Fred," said Horton, as he and Travis sat smoking on the *Sea Hound* a little later, "guess who was third on Doane's list."

Fred gave it up. The warden told him.

"Might as well suspect the president of the Y. M. C. A.! Doane's one of those men who never grow up. His body may be thirty-five, but his brain's about fourteen. Wonder who Washington'll send next! Hope he'll use as good cigars as these!"

EIGHT-THIRTY found Horton, Doane and Travis slipping out of the harbor in the *Sea Hound*. The long, slim launch, like a gray shark, barely rippled the surface. The puff of her under-water exhaust and the throb of her well-oiled engines would have been inaudible three rods away. Horton extinguished her lights.

"East, Fred, for Sacconet Ledge! Frank's got a sunken car there, and the Cape Ann schooner's due tonight. He'll probably try to run out a load of shorts. I want to catch him redhanded."

A quick mile brought them to a rough acre of half-tide ridges. Creeping into a narrow strait, the *Sea Hound* nosed gently to a stop beside the black, weedy rock.

A full hour they lay in ambush, while phosphorescent wavelets lapped the ledges, gulls cried gratingly overhead, and fish leaped in the gloom. A distant bell-buoy tolled sepulchrally.

The warden's iron hand dropped on Doane's shoulder. "The *Wraith!*"

A shadow stole into the next channel. A man rose to his feet, and peered about. The watchers on the *Sea Hound* barely breathed.

Satisfied that he was alone, the stranger pulled up a submerged car, opened a trap-door, and began dipping out lobsters. Now and then he stopped to listen. Finishing, he laid down his net, and let the car sink.

"Start her, Fred!" whispered Horton.

The first whirl of the wheel was answered by the throb of Dago Frank's engine; his boat darted seaward.

"After him!" shouted the warden.

The *Sea Hound* cleared the ledges about thirty feet behind the *Wraith*.

"We can run him down," said Horton quietly.

As the boats sheared through the long swells, splash after splash told that Frank was getting rid of his shorts. The *Wraith* proved faster than the warden had thought. He smothered a curse.

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On a sudden the distance between the two boats began to shrink. With an oath Frank bent over his engine. No use! In thirty seconds the *Sea Hound* ranged alongside her quarry.

"Jig's up, Frank!" remarked Horton.

Grasping the Portuguese's gunwale, he vaulted aboard. Frank's hand flew to his belt.

"None of that!" snapped the warden; and out flashed his pistol.

Frank dropped his hand, and sullenly faced his captor.

"Let's see how many you've got left!"

Horton's electric lantern glinted on a wet black heap of undersized shellfish. "Look, inspector! Robbing the cradle, isn't it? Lucky his engine played out. A little more, and they'd all have gone overboard."

Frank was silent and ugly. Travis touched a match to the lights on both boats, and took the *Wraith* in tow. Near Sacconet Ledge the warden began throwing over the lobsters. There were ninety-seven, all under legal length.

"Mighty expensive business, Frank."

The Portuguese muttered unintelligibly. Twenty minutes more brought them to Argentine Wharf.

"Guess I won't take chances with him," said the warden to Travis. "He may skip out, if we let him go. Telephone the jail, will you?"

Midnight struck, as Frank, handcuffed to a husky deputy, started for a cell. Thanking the warden for his trip, Doane headed for home.

"What do you think of him, Fred?" asked Horton.

Fred grunted.

"About my idea, too," agreed the warden.

WARDEN and inspector attended Frank's trial a few days later. The Portuguese, sulky and scowling, pleaded guilty, and was fined one hundred dollars. This he paid, and sneered at the warden as he passed out. "You think your boat faster than mine," he said. "We see."

"Looks as if he meant to stick in the business," observed the chagrined Horton. "He isn't afraid of anybody or anything. A prison sentence's the only thing that'll stop him; and next time he'll get it."

"Should think you'd be afraid of a bullet or a knife-stab some night."

"Oh, everybody knows I go armed," replied Horton easily. "I'd shoot quick, if I had to. The man who fools with me takes long chances. How's smuggling?"

"Still plugging away," was the inspector's cheerful reply. "Think I got a clue the other night, thanks to you. I believe Frank knows more than he'd care to tell on the witness stand. That hundred dollars never came from lobsters."

"Don't want to take another little run with me the first of the evening, do you, Inspector?"

"Not tonight. I've a report to make out that'll keep me busy till almost eleven. I'd like to talk with you soon about this Portuguese."

"If Frank gets us both after him, he might as well take up his traps and skin out."

As Horton turned the corner there was a sneer on his face.

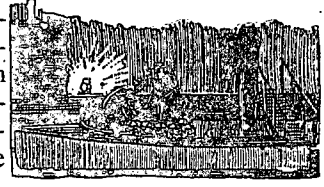
ON A cloudy evening a few days later Horton and Travis were preparing the *Sea Hound* for a trip. A lead-colored motor-boat suddenly crossed the mouth of the dock. Its sole occupant, erect and silent, looked neither to right nor left. The warden recognized him.

"There goes Frank! Wonder what deviltry he's got on the docket for tonight!"

Ten minutes more, and the *Sea Hound* was ready. Horton consulted his watch impatiently.

"Half past seven! Well, here's Cold Molasses at last!"

Somewhere up the wharf an auto chugged to a stop. Presently a dark figure stole down on the landing-stage, and stepped aboard the launch.



"Crawl under that canvas in the bow," ordered the warden.

The newcomer obeyed. The *Sea Hound* slipped out into the harbor, and headed for the channel. Another boat shot from

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the third dock below; and a familiar voice hailed Horton.

It was Inspector Doané. "Well, Warden, here I am again! Thought I'd take a run to see what I could find. Scouting a bit yourself, eh?"

"Yes. I'm going a few miles west down the Cape shore. Somebody may try to smuggle out shorts in this fog. I'll give you a tip, Inspector. Dago Frank went out of here a little while ago, bound east. One or the other of us my run afoul of him before the night is over."

Doane pricked up his ears.

"Guess I'll take a cruise over to Button Island. Perhaps I can strike his trail."

Side by side the boats ran down the channel. On the open sea they parted.

"Good luck, Inspector!"

The warden turned west.

"Same to you, Warden!"

Doane shot off in the opposite direction. A sarcastic grin curved Horton's black mustache.

"There'll be gallons of gas burned tonight, Fred."

After they had gone a mile, he kicked the canvas.

"All right!"

The concealed man crawled out, and sat down upon a box. He said nothing.

An hour after midnight the *Sea Hound* stole into a cove on the outshore of Turtle Island, not far inside the three-mile limit. Leaving Travis and the other man in the launch, Horton stumbled up over the ledges to the island's summit. There he waited, gnawing his mustache nervously.

A half-hour dragged by. Suddenly two pin-points of light, red and green, starred the southern horizon. Again they glimmered, then vanished.

"The schooner!" muttered Horton.

He started down toward the launch. A few yards from the water he almost fell over a man crouched behind a rock. The warden's hand flew to his pistol.

"Who is it? Say quick!"

The figure rose, as if to run. Horton's weapon clicked.

"Stop!"

Realizing the impossibility of escape, the stranger halted.

"Now who are you? Talk turkey! I shan't ask again."

"Frank Valente."

An angry oath burst from Horton's lips.

"What in blazes are you doing here?"

"I'm after clams to bait my trawl."

"Tell that to the dogfish!" returned the warden incredulously. "Now vamoose! If I run across you again tonight, it'll be the worse for you."

The Portuguese disappeared hurriedly into the darkness. Automatic in hand, Horton listened, until he could no longer detect the other's cat-footed tread.

"Frank's dogging me altogether too close," he grumbled, as he picked his way toward the boat. "He's got it in for me for catching him with those shorts. I must keep my eye peeled. He's an ugly devil; and he'd sooner knife me than not. Clams be jiggered!"

On board the *Sea Hound* he took counsel with Travis.

"Why's that dago skulking out here at this unearthly hour? Likely he's got another car of lobsters hid off these ledges. We've no time to fool with him now; but I'll never rest till I drive him off this coast."

They looked and listened for the *Wraith*, but in vain.

"Now for the schooner!" said Horton. "South, half east, Fred; and put the gas to her!"

The launch slid away, noiselessly and speedily.

Two hours later the *Sea Hound* was spinning shoreward. Amidships under the canvas lay a heap of short lobsters. Without her lights, and at top speed, the boat tore through the inky swells.

All at once the warden started.

"What's that?"

To port sounded a low rushing.

"Starboard, Fred," ordered Horton nervously.

Crouching in the stern, he peered back, hand on automatic. Soon he discerned a sharp prow. To his amazement and discomfiture it was drawing nearer.

"Must be Frank," he muttered. "The *Wraith's* the only craft round here that has any show with the *Sea Hound*. Shake him, Fred!"

"I'm hitting the highest gait I can."

Steadily the pursuing boat crept up, until her nose was close to the *Sea Hound's* quarter. Horton judged it time to bring matters to a head.

"What do you want?" he shouted angrily.

"Put her alongside, Frank," commanded a cool voice, which somehow sounded familiar to Horton's ears.

Cursing, he cocked his pistol.

"I'll teach you to interfere with an officer in the discharge of his duty. Keep off, or I'll shoot!"

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"Drop your gun! We've got you covered."

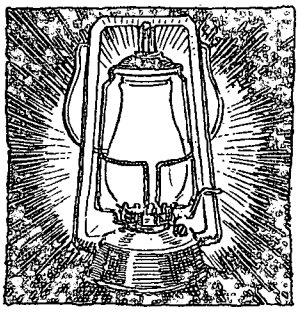
A flashlight illumined three revolvers, all pointing toward Horton. He lowered his weapon.

"Somebody'll smart for this," he blustered.

The boats were now running side by side.

"Light up, Frank," ordered the familiar voice.

A match sputtered, and soon a lantern shed its rays over both craft. And then Horton got a tremendous surprise.



He beheld the swarthy grinning features of the Portuguese. He saw three other men with leveled automatics. Two were strangers; but the third was a small man with a yellow mustache, the easy mark, Inspector Stanley Doane!

"What's under that canvas, Warden?"

The inspector's voice had a metallic note that Horton had never heard before.

"Lobsters," he answered shortly, throwing the cover off a pile shellfish.

"Fine! But what's under the lobsters?"

"Curse you!" yelled Horton.

He flung up his pistol, but the inspector was too quick.

"Drop that!" he thundered, his own weapon pointing straight at the warden's head.

Horton hesitated, obeyed.

"Take his gun, Frank!"

The Portuguese did so.

"Now jump aboard, and see what's under those lobsters."

Springing over the *Sea Hound's* gunwale, Frank fumbled beneath the wriggling heap, and found the edge of another canvas. He jerked it up, flinging the thin layer of crustaceans sprawling.

Underneath, packed like tinned sardines, cowered a half-dozen panic-stricken Chinamen!

Horton and Travis stood pale and dumfounded.

"Well, Warden," laughed Doane, "guess I'll have to notch another killing on my pistol-butt! So you're the x in this pretty little problem Uncle Sam's been trying to solve the last five years! I suspected as much from the first; and I gave you fair warning. I told you I'd never failed to land my man."

His eyes fell on the third man, crouched in the bow.

"And what modest violet have we here?"

The lantern shone on the brown, frightened face of Lee Fu, laundryman, automobilist, and agent of the Underground.

"Brought him along as interpreter, eh? Fine! Frank, we've nailed the whole bunch. Better iron 'em!"

The Portuguese snapped the handcuffs on the wrists of all three, as they stood, too much stunned for resistance. The inspector stepped aboard.

"Head her for shore, Frank. Grote'll bring the *Wraith* along."

The harbor lights were near, before Horton broke the silence. "Who are you anyway?" he growled to the Portuguese.

The latter showed his white teeth.

"Special Inspector Manuel at your service. The department sent me down here on purpose to help trap you. Uncle Sam's money bought the *Wraith* and paid my fine. The *Sea Hound* never saw the day she could run as fast as my boat. I had to hold her back the other night, so you could catch me."

"It's a pretty smooth game, Horton, to use the strict enforcement of one law as a cloak for breaking another," said Inspector Stanley Doane. "Sorry for you; but you've put your own neck under the ax. Somebody else'll have to hunt short lobsters about here for a while. Uncle Sam needs you down at Atlanta."

A REGULATION WAGON-TRAIN

TWENTY-FIVE or twenty-six wagons made up a prairie wagon-train, in the old days each drawn by 12 oxen, with 20 to 30 extra head for replacements. Each wagon had carrying capacity of from 6000 to 7000 pounds and was roofed with three thicknesses of tent canvas. Four or five mules were taken along for riding. There was a wagon-master, whose word was law; an assistant, the teamsters, a man to look after the extra oxen, and two or three men in reserve. The average time with loaded wagons was twelve to fifteen miles a day; with empty wagons, 20 miles a day. The average pay of the men was $1.00 per day, with expenses, and the teamsters had to walk beside their teams to keep them moving properly.—C. E. M.

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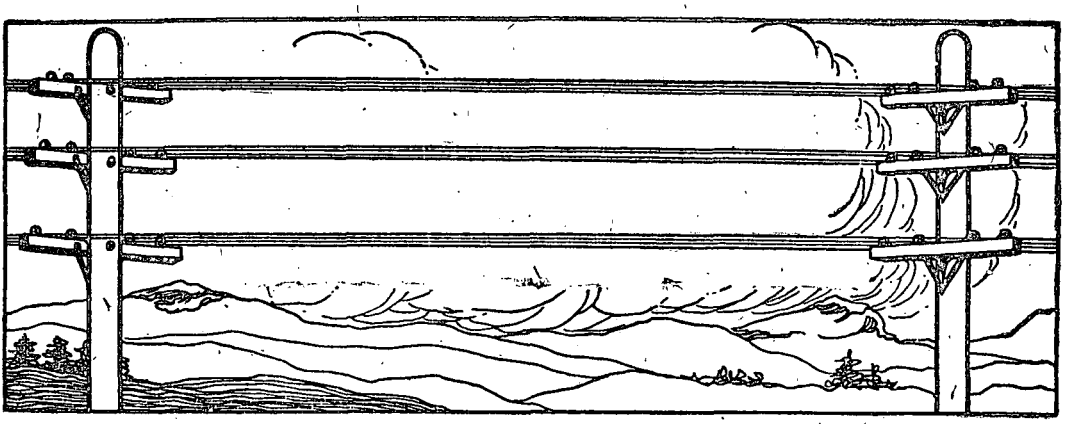

CODES

By ROMAINE H. LOWDERMILK and ARCH E. GIDDINGS
Authors of "The Boomer," etc.

THE WORLD OF THE TELEGRAPH MEN IS STRANGE TO MANY A MAN IN THE STREET, BUT OFFERS ROMANCE AND EXCITEMENT TO THOSE WHO KNOW IT

THE fellow, DeMars, blew into the operating room of the National Consolidated Telegraphs at Los Angeles late one autumn afternoon. He talked two minutes with the chief operator, and went to work that night on second Chicago, a wire conceded generally among the operators as the fastest in the house.

DeMars, dark and slender, had a penchant for fine raiment. He wore his stylish suits and haberdashery in a distinctive manner not often found among drifting "ops" and wire-men, whose working hours are spent amid the deafening din of the operating room with the fingers of the right hand steadily hammering a telegraph key and the fingers of the left simultaneously "marking off" messages with a pencil. DeMars wore a small mustache, upcurled in a foreign style. He could easily have passed as a Frenchman of wealth. But his speech was distinctly American.

"Say, girlie, how about a show tonight?" he had addressed June Harmon, typist to McPhail, the chief operator, on his second day. "I'm new to this town, and I'd like to see some of the life. They say there's a keen orchestra at the Cinderella."

June Harmon was accustomed to turning down proffered entertainment, and took no offense at DeMars's rather precipitate invitation. She only smiled and shook her head. "I don't go out nights," she said decisively

"Of course you don't," scoffed DeMars. "None of you girls do."

"Some of us don't." And she bent over her work.

"Oh, well, there's plenty that will," he answered defensively.

"Indeed there are," June had replied pleasantly.

DeMars shrugged and turned back to his own desk.

June Harmon, modish and pretty, carried beneath her outward softness a sophistication gained in the six years since the death of her father who had once been chief in that very room. With a younger brother who, until the last few years, had been dependent upon her, and a sweet mother at home, June had managed the family finances and affairs. It had not been an easy task and now, though barely twenty-four, she was a woman capable of taking care of herself in any kind of company and still maintaining her poise. June Harmon was straightforward, companionable and honest, always ready with a smile for the newest messenger-boy, or the loan of carfare to some over-spent old operator.

From her vantage point as McPhail's typist she could cast an appraising eye over every operator in the room. Of them all she would have preferred any before Hugo DeMars as a companion to her brother Ralph, who had but lately graduated from the student class into the way wires. But, like the usual run of ops who drifted into

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the National Consolidated, DeMars had made rapid acquaintances among his fellow workers. His was an attractive personality, and he a liberal spender. Gradually his circle had narrowed until Ralph Harmon remained as his especial crony. They usually lunched together at the little dairy counter downstairs, and were often together nights.

June cautioned her brother about it. "Ralph," she said, "I wish you wouldn't run with DeMars so much. He isn't doing you any good. Besides, I don't like his—well, his looks."

"Well, I do," retorted the boy impatiently. "You're always butting in on who I go with and who I don't. Hugo DeMars is all right. He's been all over the world, and he knows more about the telegraph business in a minute than old Andy McPhail or any of the rest of 'em in a week. And that's not all. I'm going with his sister now; that's where I was last night. Hugo introduced me to her. She's just about my age, and she's a pippin."

"Oh, how romantic." June elevated her brows in mock wonder, and she eyed her eighteen-year-old brother humorously. "And so it is an affair of the heart?"

"Aw-w-w, you don't know nothin'," Ralph grumbled. "Mignonne DeMars has it all over most girls for looks. She doesn't know anybody in this town and she's lonesome."

"I see," remarked June thoughtfully, but with a twinkle. "And you're the lucky one. Her brother Hugo has been looking the boys over for someone with the class to be worth while introducing to her and he has picked you." June dropped her bantering tone and became friendly, almost motherly. "I'd like to see her myself, sometime. Can't you bring her around to the house sometime when mamma and I can fix up a little party? We can have some of our crowd in and we'll make Mignonne feel more as if she were among friends."

Ralph's reply was unenthusiastic, but he warmed toward his sister. June's little parties always turned out pretty well, but he wasn't just sure how Mignonne DeMars would like a cozy home party. Mignonne seemed rather to prefer a good show or a lively dance orchestra. Ralph was trying to create an impression with her that he was older than he looked; a man of much worldly experience. And he felt that one of June's parties, given in their own home with his mother present, would serve to break down that illusion.

"Mignonne is the prettiest girl I've ever seen," he told June, by way of evading direct reply as to when he could bring his divinity to a home party, "and she's just the kind of a girl a fellow can pal around with. She works at the Mutual Trust—she's a steno—and she knows money doesn't grow on bushes and doesn't try to spend a fellow like some of these girls. All she wants is a good friend she can trust."

"That's fine," June encouraged him. "I'm sure we'll all love to meet her."

"I'll say you will," Ralph prophesied, leaving the time for the meeting rather vague. For somehow he felt that maybe, after all, Mignonne was a year or two—well, maybe three or four, his senior. And both June and his mother always preferred that he go with girls his own age or younger.

DeMars's entry into the Los Angeles telegraph office was followed two weeks later by that of another newcomer. The new man was plainly a "boomer." Two shifts and everybody knew all the places he had worked, the positions he had held, and what kind of tobacco he liked. He was a stalwart, genial young man, and "flagged" under the name Clyde Winship. He had come out from the Chicago office when the winter began to settle over the lake. The old-timers looked up from their keys out of faded watery eyes and harked back to the days when they, too, were young and followed the whims of itinerant fancy, booming on to warmer climes when winter threatened.

The young operators on the job took Winship in tow and showed him the joint where he could get good roast beef for a quarter and took him to the Seneca Hotel "where all the boys stay." From the first Winship seemed to take an especial interest in DeMars, and also in Ralph Harmon. But the two, DeMars at first, then later, Ralph, avoided his advances as though their own acquaintance was enough and they considered the newcomer an interloper. Gradually Winship's attention began to center about June Harmon, and he took to sidling over to her desk at every opportunity. Two weeks after his entry in the big office he asked for a date.

"There's a good show out at the Sta-

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dium," he addressed June diffidently. "It's a big pageant, the Wayside Cross, and they all say it's worth seeing. I'd like to see it and I wish you'd go with me?"

June shook her head. "I—I don't go out much," she said kindly.

Winship's face fell. "Well," he countered, "you'll go sometime—with me—uh, some place, won't you?"

June had to smile at that. "Possibly."

"I hope so," he said earnestly.

The next day he again approached her. "Maybe you'll let me come up to your home some evening and see you?"

"Oh, you see enough of me right here." June Harmon did not care for friendships formed upon short acquaintance. She had seen too many such affairs end disastrously.

"I don't see enough of you," he insisted stubbornly.

But her only reply was a bright smile as she turned back to her desk. He went soberly to his own. At noon Winship contrived to meet Ralph alone in the cloakroom as they went out on their twenty-minute "short" for lunch.

"Ralph, I've been wanting to tell you something," he began quietly. "Briefly it's this: That fellow DeMars is too fast for a young fellow like you to try to follow. Take my advice and lay off of him. You're liable to contract expensive habits."

"Aw, what'd you know about it?" frowned Ralph. "Where'd you butt in on who I go around with, I'd like to know?"

"Oh, I just didn't like to see a youngster like you hitting too fast a gait."

"Well, don't worry yourself sick about my gait," Ralph sneered, as he grabbed up his hat and coat. He shot from the place bound for the little café where he and Mignonne cozily lunched each day.

EVERY op was indignant when Winship got canned. He had been with them barely a month, but in that short time had won a place in the hearts of all. That is, all but DeMars.

Winship was accused of "padding" his numbers. He had been working on Seattle the morning previous and the records showed that ten whole numbers were missing. It was paltry dishonesty, this skipping of numbers to increase an average, though many an operator has done it with safety for the reason that the laborious checking makes discovery unlikely. But cheating to gain the few cents bonus for the greater number of messages handled is disdained by all save those of lesser character. It did not seem that Clyde Winship would be one of these, but on the face of the charges he was. The men knew Winship had worked on Seattle but part of the morning, and that when he had been changed to another circuit DeMars had taken over the key.

"It's DeMars," they charged. "He framed you, and you don't seem to mind it. Why don't you order McPhail to investigate?"

"Oh, I don't mind," was Winship's easy rejoinder. "Maybe I did it myself. There's lots of jobs as good as this."

Later when he stood at June's desk to receive his pay his eyes held a quizzical look. "Aren't you going to do anything to clear yourself?" she demanded. "All of us are sure it was DeMars. Can't you prove that it was?"

Winship's demeanor was unruffled. "What's the use? Jobs are easy to find. One's as good as another."

"You're a sheep like all the rest, Winship," June said in a disappointed tone. "I thought you might be—different. But I guess I was mistaken. She handed him his pay and held out her hand. "Well, good-by and good luck."

He took her hand gravely, held it a moment and then went out through the swing doors. One of the ops coming in later said he had met Winship on the street and that the latter had told him he was bound for El Paso. The ops shook their heads over their desks. Another good man gone wrong, they said to themselves. That night his room at the Seneca was occupied by a new man. Winship had left no address.

NOISE was indispensable to Fred Hess, the night money clerk. Behind the woven steel inclosure of the Money Transfer Department he labored to its rhythm with almost fanatical zeal. The main office of the National Consolidated Telegraphs teemed with business at six o'clock in the evening, and Fred Hess teemed with business behind his steel wicket. Night letter traffic poured in, and from every part of the brilliantly lighted lobby came an intermittent babble of conversation.

Detached, yet a part of all this racket,

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and dignified almost to the breaking point by the title of money-transfer clerk, Fred Hess, his round head on its long neck arching from his collar like some weird bent-over toadstool, concentrated on his work. Apparently miles away, submerged to the ears in a stack of work on the desk, it seemed impossible that anything short of a fire alarm or an after-dinner earthquake could interrupt him. Yet suddenly he straightened, and pressed his face against the meshed grill-work. A shrill whistle came from his puckered lips and he beckoned awkwardly to someone in the crowded lobby.

Ralph Harmon answered the summons. Ralph had been lounging in a seemingly aimless manner in the lobby, but Fred, apparently so engulfed in his labors, had spotted him at once.

"Say, Ralph," Fred began as soon as the boy came within speaking distance, "got time to take my place a few seconds while I go out in the alley and take a smoke?"

"Sure," Ralph replied obligingly. It was not the first time he had so favored the night money-transfer clerk.

Fred slipped from his stool and snapped the bolt on the little door at his side. Young Ralph Harmon stepped in and took the stool, while Fred shot out at the rear into the alley where the messengers congregated.

On this night Ralph Harmon had not come aimlessly into the lobby and Fred's range of visibility. He wanted Fred to ask him to substitute. He had been in the lobby all the previous evening hoping to gain entry to the money-transfer desk, but Fred had not called him. Tonight luck had been better.

Now that he was actually seated at Fred's desk, Ralph glanced carelessly about to see that he was not being especially observed. Disinterestedly, and with an air of its being only a part of his work, he pulled open the upper right hand drawer of the desk where change and the code are kept. There was not a large amount of cash, as large sums would be in the safe. The change drawer carried only a small amount.

But there was the code.

The code, printed on a white sheet and affixed to a piece of cardboard by means of clips, bore the code-words for amounts from one dollar to ten thousand. Though the intervening numbers were not represented, the units were, and from them any amount could be coded.

Ralph's errand was to pick out the words coding the amount, $9852. In his mind ran the words he had been remembering the past three days: "Nine-thousand word, eight-hundred word, fifty-two word." Rapidly he ran his eyes over the sheet. There was "NULLIFIED," the nine-thousand word; "OVERTHROW," the eight-hundred word; "DEBAUCH," the Fifty-two word. "Nullified Overthrow Debauch," he repeated to himself. "Nine thousand, eight hundred and fifty-two bucks! Whew!" Then at the bottom of the sheet were the "Vigilant" and "Caution" words for each separate day of the week, each one different, yet each one meaning pay—key words denoting the manner of payment, and fully as important to the moneygram as the code words for the amounts. But Mignonne had told him there would be no need for those all-important words, as she did not intend to use the code against the Telegraph Company. And Ralph was convinced that a moneygram without the pay word could exercise no swindle upon the company, as none save those in charge of the code knew a word of it, and at that, the pay words changed each day.

Mignonne DeMars had young Ralph Harmon well under her supple white thumb. Indeed, she was the type who could put many a full grown man under control. So the handling of Ralph had been but a bit of uninteresting side play. Still, some of Mignonne's work had been so realistic that Hugo DeMars had waxed exceedingly jealous, but the dainty Mignonne reminded him that his keeping his temper down and his mouth shut meant a trifling difference between twenty thousand plasters and nothing. With this conclusive reminder DeMars managed to control his emotion and continue to accord young Ralph Harmon all due cordiality.

And then one night, from a strategic place upon the sofa of the little library of the DeMars apartment, Mignonne confided to Ralph that she was lonesome and unprotected and that she longed for a nice home down in Florida or Havana or somewhere, with a nice young man like him. His heart swelled with a desire to accompany her to Arcady and, with all the lights turned out but the big piano lamp in the other end of the room, she let Ralph tell her of his love. He thrilled at the tears which glistened in her dark eyes, and nearly fainted when her slender, rounded arms went about his neck in complete admission of her own love.

After that, Ralph Harmon was ripe for

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anything that promised easy or rapid money with which to fulfill their dreams. And Mignonne suggested the way. Twenty thousand dollars would be about the right amount for a starter, she explained, and all he had to do was get the code words, and she would do the rest.

"You see," Mignonne explained to him, "when we get the code words I'll spring a faked-up moneygram on some crooked race-gamblers down at Tia Juana who cheated my poor dear father out of every cent he had once. I'll just be getting my own father's money back, and nobody but the crooked gamblers will lose a cent. It won't be wrong to gyp a crook, will it, dearie?"

Ralph Harmon was dubious. "But the Telegraph Company—you're sure they won't lose? Won't the code work back onto them?"

"Silly, of course not! Only those race-track gamblers," Mignonne had purred, "I promise that. And then, why, to you and me it will be a fortune."

With her slim form cuddled in his arms young Ralph Harmon agreed that it would, and she rewarded him with a kiss that caused Hugo DeMars, his eye glued to the key-hole, to double up in anguish.

And now Ralph had done as Mignonne instructed. He had secured the code words. He replaced the code-sheet, closed the change drawer and was contentedly holding down Fred Hess's stool when that worthy returned from his cig. in the alley.

"Much obliged," said Fred.

"Much obliged," returned Ralph. Arcady seemed very close now. And, with the code words fresh in mind, he hurried straight to Mignonne.

WHEN Clyde Winship left the employ of the National Consolidated under cloud of having padded his numbers he had not gone to El Paso as he contrived to leave word that he had. Instead, after a quiet interview with the superintendent and a brief talk with the traffic chief, he went straight to the wide-awake agent of the apartment house where the DeMars had rooms, stating he desired a room for one month or longer. Vacancies, the agent assured him were a positive rarity. However, by a stroke of great good fortune one small apartment had been vacated. Winship accepted it eagerly, paying the required deposit. He left the place whistling happily.

Telephones had been more than just telephones to Clyde Winship ever since the National Consolidated Telegraphs had been converted to the use of pony telephone circuits for communication between the main and the branches. Originally all office communication had been in Morse, but the company had learned that it could hire a telephone operator for less than a Morse op, and all messages for local delivery were routed out to the branches via phone if they could be more expeditiously delivered in that manner. To make the business more efficient the National Consolidated had secured a newly patented and extremely sensitive telephone transmitter much superior to the ones in general use. Winship, whose experience with the company covered a wide range, had made an especial study of the new phone, and the little trick of connecting his apartment with that of the DeMars was as simple as chewing gum.

So, when he went to his new apartment, one of his bags contained, like the black bag of many a famed detective, appliances and tools for tapping in on Apartment D. His first act was to equip the small wall-phone in his own room with an extension cord to an easy chair. Next he stole down the hallway to the DeMars door. From somewhere on the floor came the whine of a vacuum cleaner and the banging of furniture. For a full minute he tried key after key. The preliminary grindings of the elevator as it started upward came from the shaft, and he darted back to his room. After what seemed an eternity he heard the elevator go down and a door slam on the floor above. Back at the DeMars door he finally found a key in his collection that turned the catch. He slipped inside.

A bottle and some whisky glasses on the library table was the first sight to greet his eyes. A door leading to the bedroom was ajar. He glanced through the crack. It was empty, the bed tousled, and numerous cigarette stubs littered the floor. Clearly Mignonne was a slattern in the art of housewifery. The wall-phone was the same pattern as his own. He removed its transmitter, substituting the more sensitive one supplied him by the traffic chief, trusting that the DeMars used the phone

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so little as not to notice the difference in shape of the transmitter.

Five minutes later he had a duplex wire under the DeMars carpet leading back through their apartment and out into the hall, through a hole bored beneath the rear door sill and along the hall carpet to his own room.

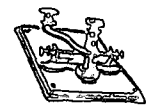
For two days, whenever the DeMars apartment was occupied, Winship was at the other end of the wire.

Long is the list of those who have attempted to defraud the National Consolidated Telegraphs Company through the medium of their money transfer service. But brief is the tally of successful ones. Every safeguard is in use, every loophole watched. The lid is every ready to drop on the sharper who thinks he can match his wits against the system. Winship, with his phone, was but a part of the system. Sent out from Chicago on the trail of the dapper DeMars whom the company suspected of having turned a fraudulent trick at New Orleans, he had taken a position as an operator and, finding that was not the place from which to put his finger on DeMars's game, had padded his numbers, received apparent discharge and seemingly left the town for El Paso. But with his phone, and in close communication with the superintendent, he lay in wait, the coils of the law and the system gradually closing about Hugo DeMars and only awaiting concrete evidence of attempt to defraud.

RALPH HARMON pecked away at his typewriter amid the din of some three hundred instruments in the long operating room and fumed at the slowness of the sender in Pasadena. It was barely two o'clock, and with two hours to go it was irritating to copy the painfully deliberate sending of some old lady afflicted with telegrapher's cramp, and who should have been superannuated a decade ago. With a good fast man on the other end the work would be bearable, but now Ralph's thoughts flew to the time when he and Mignonne could get away from the tedium. Havana, Paris——

"Bk." The word came in over the Pasadena wire. Mechanically Ralph ceased his typing, for "bk" meant "break," or in other words, "don't put this down." Then the Pasadena op laboriously thumped out, "I'm going to copy for a while. Hand's getting tired. Want to change over?"

Ralph looked over at the hook and saw there were perhaps two dozen messages to be sent. A good hour's work with her as receiver. Oh, well, she wasn't such a bad scout. She couldn't help her cramped sending. He touched the key and tapped out his "ok."



He changed over to the chair next to him and caught the handful of messages off the hook. Before he was midway through the first someone tapped him on the shoulder. It was Hugo DeMars.

"Mignonne's out in the hall, kid," DeMars told him. "Wants to see you about something. Here, I'll take your key till you get back."

Ralph drew a breath of relief. His nerves had been at high tension the past few days, and he was thankful for a few moments away from the wire. He couldn't imagine what Mignonne wanted to ask him, but it thrilled him to know she was near. He pointed out to DeMars the place he had left off, and went out into the hall. As he would be gone but a moment he did not trouble to explain to the chief that DeMars was sitting in on Pasadena. It did not occur to him that there was always the chance for a substitute to send through a faked message for which the blame could be laid at the door of the original operator.

Ralph, like other young operators, thought the company's check system unbeatable. He knew that each message bears a sending number and, after being sent, goes to the checking room to be audited for omissions or duplications, all a part of the telegraph company's aim for accuracy. Sometimes a number is omitted. An operator may have sent message No. 44 and then sent No. 46. If the error is not detected by the receiving operator at the time, the checking room catches it, and sends through a message: "This represents our No. 45 to you," consequently Ralph felt perfectly safe in leaving DeMars in his place while he was talking to Mignonne. For he never once considered the other capable of duplicity.

But DeMars had a plan of action laid out. A plan he had successfully worked before. Finishing the message Ralph had begun, DeMars began on a moneygram as the next one. This he composed from memory while his eyes were on the authentic message for which he was substituting his fraudulent one.

He had the code-words, Mignonne had supplied them, but these without the pay word of the day were worthless. But throughout the day he had watched the

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money transfers that passed through his hands. Four of them carried the pay word RANKLE. Only one had SIMMER as the pay word. From this he gathered that RANKLE was the pay word for the day representing "identification waived" transfers, as the greater majority are sent that way to avoid the delay occasioned by the rigid care exercised by the company in paying vigilant and caution transfers.

So, with message No. 44 before his eyes, he composed and sent the following moneygram from memory in place of it:

REPRESENTING MUTUAL TRUST COMPANY RANKLE MARIE IRVINE PASADENA NULLIFIED OVERTHROW DEBAUCH UNITED LUMBER AND SHIPPING COMPANY.

He then marked off the real No. 44 as having been sent. He went on with the sending, a satisfied smile on his face for, during Ralph's twenty-minute lunch relief which the boy had stretched to nearly half an hour at the cozy café where he and Mignonne were accustomed to lunch together, DeMars had contrived to take Ralph's place that day. On the Hollywood line he had sent out a moneygram, the duplicate of the one he had just sent to Pasadena. So Mignonne, within the next two hours would visit both the Hollywood and Pasadena offices with letters and other identification from the Mutual Trust where she worked as a stenographer. She would collect the money, practically twenty thousand dollars on the two orders, and the fraud would not be discovered until the moneygrams were checked back to the originating point which was given as "Po", Portland, Oregon.

When Ralph returned to his key he found DeMars tapping out messages to the Pasadena office. He took his place, and the other went back to his own desk. Out in the streets Mignonne stepped into a taxi, and whirled away toward the Hollywood office to collect the first of the two moneygrams.

A little more than an hour later word came into the superintendent's office that Mignonne DeMars, alias Marie Irvine, had been apprehended at the Pasadena office as she attempted to cash a faked moneygram. She was now en route to Los Angeles in the custody of the special officers who had witnessed her receiving money at the Hollywood office and later followed her to Pasadena as directed to do by Clyde Winship, the company's representative.

The whole affair had occupied barely thirty minutes of the superintendent's time. And the DeMars case was entering its zero hour.

Shortly thereafter Clyde Winship slippped into the superintendent's office and, in response to the official's nod, took a chair. The superintendent, with a smile at Winship, pressed a buzzer.

The door opened and Ralph Harmon entered, followed by the chief operator. The boy's face wore a grim look, plainly worried, but with no manifestation of fear. Winship's opinion of June Harmon's brother went up considerably.

"Why, hello, Winny," Ralph greeted Winship surprisedly. "You back looking for a job again?"

Before Winship could reply the superintendent turned on Ralph abruptly. "Your name is Ralph Harmon, is it not?"

"Yes, sir."

"How long have you been with this company?"

"I was a messenger three years while I finished school, then was on as student operator. I've been working here as an operator for a year."

"What wires did you work today?"

Something of his assurance left the boy's face at this question. He hesitated, fingering a button on his coat before replying. "Well," he began slowly, "I worked on El Paso and Tucson this morning. Then I worked some of the way circuits after lunch, and after that——"

"That's enough. You say you worked way circuits. What wires were they?"

A look of fear crept into the boy's eyes. He glanced wonderingly at the official, and then at Winship and the old chief operator. "I don't remember. I—oh, yes, I was on Redlands and San Bernardino and Pasadena——"

Instantly the superintendent whipped a telegram from his desk and held it before the boy's eyes.

"And you sent this?"

Ralph examined it, his face drawn. It was the moneygram Hugo DeMars had sent. As Ralph read the code words that he himself had given Mignonne his eyes sought the door. His mind flashed to the moment DeMars had taken his place on the Pasadena wire. Mignonne had been

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in the hall waiting to tell him that she and her brother Hugo were expecting to go down to Tia Juana that evening after work and be gone for two days. She had said they were going to collect the money from those crooked gamblers. Ralph recognized that he could scarcely prove that it had not been he who sent that money-gram, so cleverly had DeMars's work been planned.

Suddenly he determined not to try. Ralph pictured Mignonne in prison as a result of his having obtained the code words for her. Somehow it seemed to him that had he not secured the code from Fred, Mignonne would still be innocent of crime. He sought only to protect her.

"What have you to say?" the superintendent demanded sharply.

"Yes. I—I sent it," Ralph faltered.

The superintendent was unrelenting. "Portland never sent such a message," he went on severely. "Harmon, you've committed a fraud against the company, and if you get off with less than ten years you're lucky. Do you confess to sending this message, and the one to Hollywood?"

Ralph caught his breath. That another such message should have gone to Hollywood was beyond his belief, but he thought of the code and again of Mignonne.

"Yes," he repeated mechanically, "Yes, I sent them."

The superintendent leaned back with a sigh of relief. He eyed the youth appraisingly. "You're a liar," he said good naturedly. "Young man, I'm mighty glad to tell you that you're a liar."

Ralph broke down completely. He sobbed and buried his face in his arms.

"You've been in bad company, young man," the superintendent said. "You've had a good record with us, but that woman and her husband—" He paused to let the full significance of this information sink into the boy's stunned consciousness. "Her husband, Hugo DeMars, took occasion to substitute for you and sent these two wires.

"Thanks to Mr. Winship he knew of the plan, and now we've got the pair, along with evidence enough to send them up for twenty years. We don't blame you for trying to shield the woman—you're a young fool like most young men. But we can't risk having you here. We know how you filched the code words under the impression they could not be used to defraud the company. But you see it didn't work. And we can't take chances on you here. You're fired. And you're lucky we don't send you to the pen along with your—your friends."

When the superintendent had finished Ralph looked up. "It's a lesson I'll remember all my life," he choked childishly. "I'm glad they didn't get to rob the company, and I p-promise never t-to do anything wrong again. I d-don't know how to th-thank you."

"The company holds no ill will toward you," the superintendent went on impressively. "Only, we can't afford to keep weak sisters on the job. But I'll give you a tip. We're putting in a new manager out at the Pasadena branch, and he is looking for an assistant. He says he will take you in charge and guarantee to keep you in line. He is a man we have faith in, and if he's willing to take the responsibility we're going to let him."

Ralph straightened perceptibly. A steadier light came into his eyes.

"Just tell me where I can find that new manager. I want that job. I want a chance to show the company that I can go straight. All I want is another chance to——"

"Well, you'll get it," Winship interrupted kindly. He rose and held out his hand to the boy. "I'm taking over the Pasadena branch, and you're hired. Come along, let's go out and look it over."

A week later Ralph invited his new manager home to dinner. June was having some of her friends in, and the little dinner was assuming the air of a gay party.

"You've only been around Los Angeles two months?" one of them spoke to Winship. "And do you think you will like it here?"

"I think I'm going to." Winship replied hopefully, and his glance strayed across the table to June. Her larkspur blue eyes met his own.

"Yes, I know darn well I am," but his words were lost in the chatter of glad voices about him.

WHALING IN THE NEW WAY

THE romantic days of the old whaling ships seem a long way in the past when one reads of whale-hunting in the Pacific with machine-guns mounted in airplanes.

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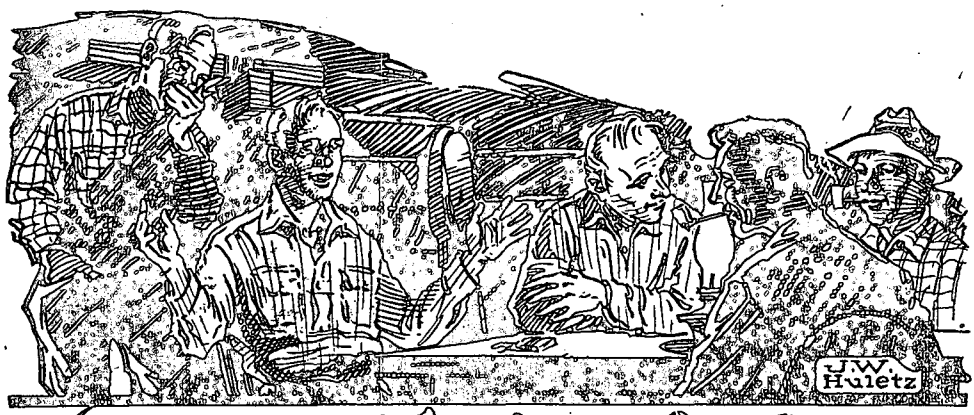

The Story Tellers' Circle

WOLF PACKS

A WHILE ago a certain scientist, discussing wolves and their habits, declared that they were naturally self-sufficient creatures and denied that they ran in packs as described in many of our stories. With memories of "The Phantom Wolf" in mind, and sensing the possibility for an interesting discussion, we asked Von Ziekursch what he had to say on the question—with the expected result.

"I think I could offer to guarantee that scientist a view of some wolf packs this winter," Von Ziekursch came back, "Of course, I don't know how much this particular scientist learned out of books and how much through actual attempts at gaining experience, but I do know that abstract book learning has little to do with realities. I am an engineer and I found that I had my engineering to learn after the world had been assured by various learned professors that I already was one.

"One of the most amusing experiences I ever had was listening to an ichthyologist who had made a study of cetaology tell an old whaleman about the habits of whales. Afterward the whaleman assured me that this particular scientist was a 'damn fool.'

"Unhesitantly I assert that the scientist who claims wolves do not pack up doesn't know what he's talking about.

"On either December 11th or 12th, 1912, I shot seven of them out of a pack north of Athapupuskow Lake, which is in The Pas region of Manitoba. There were either twenty-two or twenty-three wolves in that pack.

"Last year near Ile a La Crosse a pack killed and ate a Canadian war veteran who was trapping there. The end of this story is that he had so much shrapnel in him that they died of lead poisoning. A little later just three or four miles north of the town of Porth Arthur, which is a thriving community on the Canadian Pacific in Ontario, a pack killed and ate an old white trapper and also two Indians who went together to hunt that particular pack for the bounties. When their skeleton remnants were found there were also the remains of seventeen dead wolves which they had killed. I think the Canadian Government would vouch for these as well as many other recorded cases of similar nature. But, maybe, some scientists would say deaths were due to heart failure.

"Personally, on two other occasions I have seen a pack of wolves, both times at night, and had no possible way of estimating the numbers as they came out of the edge of timber.

"I have a friend who tried raising sheep just beyond the border in Ontario. In something less than a month last year eight hundred of them were killed by wolves and on two occasions the pack was so large that he dared not go out of the cabin with his assistant to try driving them off with repeating rifles. I wish that scientist would try to convince him that they were not wolves. The discussion would be interesting!"

Perhaps some members of the Circle have experiences of their own that would make interesting contributions to the wolf discussion? Send 'em in. They will be particularly pertinent as we have another fine Von Ziekursch story, in which wolves play an active part, coming along in the number after next.

A TEXAN WITH A PEN

A WRITER whose Western stories receive a ready welcome from our readers is Harley P. Lathrop, whose story

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"Double-Crossed" appears in this issue. As we may have mentioned before, Mr. Lathrop is a rancher of the Texas salt grass country who writes stories to "while away the tedium of a bad spell of weather at the ranch." Of his interesting ranch country he enthusiastically writes:

Big bull red fish, eight to fifteen pounds, with lots of fight in them, have been running fine in the salt water bayous adjoining the ranch and I have caught many of them. Then we have trout fishing—salt water trout. Snappy devils with a mouth like tissue paper and when they bite they mighty near flop out on the bank they are so hungry.

For duck hunting, the coast country hereabouts can't be beat. They are thick this year—the Federal migratory bird law has proved wonderful. We branded our fall calf crop last week and all the prairie ponds were literally black with mallards. Gentle, too—when we rode past them they would fly up and settle right back down. Big quail crop in prospect, and that's where I shine.

Accounting for the genuine Western ring to his work, Mr. Lathrop explains that he always tries as nearly as possible to picture genuine characters of the range today. In his own words:

Don't believe there is a writer of Western stories today who mixes up more with the rank and file of cowmen and sees as much of present day range condtions in the Southwest as I do. I generally buy a good many steers to put to Oklahoma every spring. Hit the state pretty thoroughly then so am fairly familiar with all sections of Texas. The border is my favorite. Things there are still fairly woolly when it comes to resorting to violence. But at that it's the same most everywhere. Steal a cow in Texas and be hung—kill a man and go free still holds good.

NEXT TIME

MANY of our readers will be delighted to hear that Cleek, "The Man of Forty Faces," will make his return to SHORT STORIES in the complete novel which will open our next issue. To those of you who have not met Cleek, a pleasant surprise is due in "The Riddle of the Amber Ship" by Mary E. and Thomas W. Hanshew. Cleek is one of the foremost characters of detective and mystery stories. Reclaimed from his career as a master cracksman, he dedicated an equal number of years to helping the police in expiation for the harm he had done. Aided by his remarkable faculty for changing his features, Cleek soon became a terror to evil-doers and established a reputation as a criminal hunter—a reputation he is hard put to it to maintain in protecting the Amber Ship.

In the same number Clem Yore will make his first appearance in SHORT STORIES with "Mac of the Tumbling K," a novelette packed full of cattle country action.

Mr. Yore is a Westerner to the core and knows his characters as every-day acquaintance. Of his story he says:

I'm going to try and give you boys the best that's in me, and hope I'm not thrown out of the bunkhouse where these other high, wide and handsome buckaroos foregather. The yarn, "Mac of the Tumbling K" comes mighty near being true, that is as true as I could make it. Some of the characters are yet living and, while, like me, they are not riding at Cheyenne, Pendleton, Roswell, Calgary, or Phoenix, they can pick a hat out of the dust and still empty a six-gun into a bushel basket at forty feet in less than three seconds. If you like Mac perhaps I'll string out another tale relative to this crowd at some other time. It won't be writing for me to do this, I'll just dip my pen in affection and let the dern thing slide, for I'll not be a seeing the paper for the mist and the smoke in my eyes.

I love the open, the wide reach of life, thought, sights, the high happiness of great vistas, the winter sunsets, the spring, the summer, the artistry of frost on aspen. The camaraderie of my ponies, Chub and Coalie, my dog, the birds, the chipmunks, wood-chucks (which Eastern folk call ground hogs) all these simple beings seem to me to radiate a pulsing thoroughness of affection—they make the world wholly glad. Then everything is clean; a round flow of honestly meant cuss-words sounds joyously, out here. Nothing cloys, there is no satiety, but ever an urge; a fellow loves a fellow and can call a man a friend, in the good old-fashioned Andrew Jackson definition of the term. These are the things I try to put into my stories.

John Briggs will contribute another Western story and E. Charles Vivian will be there with a tale of the Northwest Mounted Police.

Among the other contributors you will find Vincent Starrett with another Jimmy Lavender story, Frank Richardson Pierce with a Northern yarn, Roy W. Hinds with a fine sea story—and of course the third part of "The Desert's Price."

THE MAIL BAG

"TURPENTINERS," William West Winter's story of the Southern turpentine camps, made a big hit with this Circle member who has been there and knows. It is good news to announce that we have secured another fine novel by Mr. Winter.

Editor, SHORT STORIES,
Dear Sir:

Having been a reader of SHORT STORIES for some years back, I would like to let you know the pleasure I get from same.

I have been all over this big world of ours even to the so-called Far North, having had a desire to "go," seeking nothing in particular

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only to be there and know in my own mind just "what was what."

I can truthfully say I have never read a story in all my reading I enjoyed so much as "Turpentiners" by William West Winter. I spent nearly a year in a camp similar to the one in Mr. Winter's story and can say he has justified the same in his writing. I am not a lover of things impossible, but I do love stories true to life.

Hoping you will have many more such writers as Mr. Winter, I remain

HARRY COLLINS,
40 Water St.,
Auburn, N. Y.

Here is a reader who is able to check up on J. Allan Dunn's South Sea Island stories—and finds they register O. K.:

READERS' CHOICE EDITOR,
Dear Sir:

I enjoy practically every story in SHORT STORIES, but James B. Hendryx and J. Allan Dunn are my especial favorites.

Am able to check up on Dunn's stories as I have fished shark from an outrigger dugout and a few other things down below the Honolulu Guam transport route. Dunn's atmosphere is excellent.

T. K. BROUNE,
1129 New Britain Ave.,
Elmwood, Conn.

Next comes a rooter for Northern stories. We have several Northwest Mounted Police stories on the schedule—yes, and there is what looks like a R. N. W. M. P. serial in the offing.

READERS' CHOICE EDITOR,
Dear Sir:

I have been reading the SHORT STORIES for quite some time and not a number has passed that I did not read from cover to cover. I have read other magazines but none have pleased me as much as SHORT STORIES.

Could it not be possible for you to have another Northwest Mounted Police story?

WILLIAM WASSERMEYER,
148 East 18th St.,
New York City.

If you meet a man roaming around the desert behind a burro loaded with copies of SHORT STORIES, it will probably be Bert W. McGrath, who says:

Editor, SHORT STORIES,
Dear Sir:

I thought it about time to put in a word or two in favor of SHORT STORIES. I have been out on the desert twenty-one miles from a post office, but before I went I loaded up with magazines. My favorite is SHORT STORIES. Long live SHORT STORIES, the best of its kind printed.

BERT MCGRATH,
191 East Monterey St.,
Pomona, Calif.

Even from South Africa comes a voice to protest against any fundamental change in the make-up of SHORT STORIES:

Editor, SHORT STORIES,
Dear Sir:

I have been a reader and ardent admirer of SHORT STORIES for some considerable time, and I have gained much pleasure and knowledge from your pages. All your stories and authors fill the bill as far as I am concerned.

In reply to the reader who demands more serials, I am compelled to write and give you Mr. Punch's advice to those about to marry—"Don't."

The absence of serial stories is, in my opinion, one of SHORT STORIES's chief draws. The one you usually publish is quite enough. Personally I save up the three or four numbers—as the case may be—and read your serial as I would a novel.

P. I. VAN DER RICE,
Poste Restante,
King Williamstown,
South Africa.

DON'T FORGET THE COUPON! CUT IT OUT TODAY AND LET US KNOW YOUR OPINION OF THE STORIES IN THIS NUMBER

READERS' CHOICE COUPON

"Readers' Choice" Editor, SHORT STORIES:
Garden City, N. Y.

My choice of the stories in this number is as follows:

1 _____ 3 _____

2 _____ 4 _____

5 _____

I do not like:

_____ Why? _____

NAME _____ ADDRESS _____

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Are you a micawber?

MEET an old friend—Mr. Wilkins Micawber! First introduced to you by Charles Dickens in "David Copperfield". Always procrastinating, always out of money, always "*waiting for something to turn up*". And yet such a good fellow in so many ways.

Nevertheless your sympathy went out to his trusting, never-deserting wife and their five children. And today you have only to look about you in every city, town and village—in every office, shop or factory—to see how this little family has multiplied thousands and millions of times. You meet its descendents everywhere.

A micawber is the person who hasn't a penny in the bank, a share in the building and loan association, an interest in any benefit fund or a dollar's worth of life insurance. A micawber is a person who hasn't saved a cent.

CHARLES DICKENS put the word, *micawber*, into the English language seventy-five years ago. Straight-thinking economists put the word, *budget*, into it eighty-eight years before that.

Micawbers prefer to spend what they have and wait for "something to turn up". No limitations of a budget for them! Yet the strange part of it is this: It isn't a *budget* that holds your scale of living down; it's your *income*. In fact, budgeting your expense is a real incentive to increase your income, as well as the best way to get the very most out of what you have now. It tells you just where your money is going, *before it goes instead of afterwards*. The difference between budgeting and accounting is that one looks ahead while the other looks back. Which way do you wish to look?

Get on a budget basis and you will step up and out of the micawber family—if you are a member of it now. You will stop waiting for "something to turn up." You will begin to go ahead. You will begin to get your share of the good things that only savings can buy, including your financial independence in the years to come.

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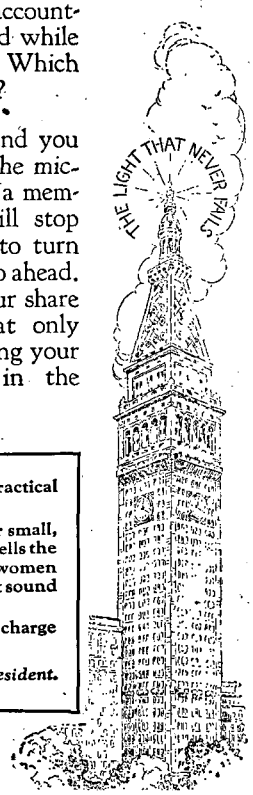
"My other piece of advice, Copperfield, you know. Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure, nineteen nineteen, six, result happiness. Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure twenty pounds ought and six, result misery."



The Metropolitan Life Insurance Company has an intimate financial relationship with more than 20,000,000 policy-holders. In this friendly contact with one-sixth of the population of the U. S. and Canada, it has come to know how great a need exists for a definite, simple plan of saving.

Most people would like to save if they knew how. But the question usually is—"How can I save on my income?" To answer this question, the Metropolitan has worked out a simple, practical plan for budgeting one's income.

It shows practical budgets worked out for small, medium and generous incomes. And it tells the true and inspiring stories of many men and women who have learned to save—true stories that sound like fairy tales.

On your request, we will mail you free of charge a copy of this booklet, "Let Budget Help".

HALEY FISKE, *President.*

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